

#### IV. THE TRADE OF PALMYRA

One of the most famous of the sites associated with the caravan trade, and one to which allusion has been made several times already, is the city of Palmyra. Indeed, there can be very little doubt of the significance of the caravan trade at Palmyra, as well as the fact that Palmyra on at least one occasion in the third century rose, albeit briefly, to the forefront of affairs in the Roman world. Despite the relative abundance of evidence which deals with the trade at Palmyra, and the close attention which this evidence has received, there are still several areas of inquiry which can profitably be investigated.

Historians have often seen the caravan trade in this area as something which was built up by either Romans or Parthians, and in which the Palmyrenes played the role of intermediary or carrier. This view would argue that the commerce assumed great importance in the making of policy by the great powers in this region, and that one or both of these powers were interested in the maintenance of the commerce and in the role which the Palmyrenes played in it. In view of this, we might well examine what role Romans or Parthians played in the commerce, if any, and consequently what role the trade might have played in the determination of their respective policies in the region.

In addition, there are several other areas of inquiry which will merit attention. What role might the eastern commerce have played in the events which led up to Palmyra's eventual rebellion from Roman authority, and to what extent might these roles have been significant to Palmyra or to Rome? What special status did Palmyra

hold within the empire which enabled it, uniquely among the provincial cities of the Roman Empire, to maintain its own military forces, and indeed, in the third century, to raise its own army; and did the spice and silk trades have anything to do with that special status?

#### **IV.1 The Rise of Palmyra**

The beginning of Palmyra's ascendancy in the long-distance eastern commerce appears to date from the Antonine period, although evidence for trade passing through the city can be found from much earlier dates. Neither Strabo nor Isidore of Charax even mentioned Palmyra in their descriptions of the region,<sup>1</sup> although Pliny and Appian do mention its existence.<sup>2</sup> Neither, however, give the impression that the city had any of its later importance, even though Appian does mention that the city was a centre of long-distance trade between the Parthian and Roman realms. Nonetheless, in these early years it would appear that the inhabitants of the oasis were still semi-nomadic, as Appian states that they were able to remove all their material wealth across the Euphrates when Antony attacked them in 42 B.C. The process of urbanisation at the site is quite problematical, and it does not appear to have begun in earnest until the Roman period.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 27.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny *NH* V. 21; Appian *BC* V. 9

## *The Origins of Palmyrene Trade*

The oasis of Tadmor, which came later to be called Palmyra by the Greeks, has a long history of habitation, but the urban development which characterised the city in the Roman period does not appear to have commenced until the first century A.D. There are traces of the beginning of urbanisation and the establishment of the 'national' cult of Bel from the late first century B.C. to the early first century A.D., revealing that the city began to coalesce from the surrounding tribes around the oasis at about this time,<sup>3</sup> possibly under the stimulus of the trade which Appian relates was already passing through the oasis. This new city seems to have been incorporated into the Empire at a relatively early date. The Palmyrene tax law of A.D. 137 mentions the involvement of Germanicus in the affairs of the city in A.D. 18-19,<sup>4</sup> and a boundary-marker states that the boundaries of the territory of Palmyra were fixed by the governor of Syria, Creticus Silanus, between A.D. 11-17.<sup>5</sup> It has even been suggested that the Temple of Bel, dedicated in A.D. 32, was erected to celebrate the inclusion of the city into the Empire.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the exact date and circumstances of the inclusion, it would seem that it was relatively early and the city should accordingly be understood as a tributary city of the province of Syria for the majority of its existence under Roman control.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert: Palmyre et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla* (Paris 1984), 9.

<sup>4</sup> J.F. Matthews "The Tax Law of Palmyra", 161.

<sup>5</sup> H. Seyrig "L'incorporation de Palmyre à l'empire romain" *Syria* 13 (1932), 266; J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre* (Paris 1985), 37.

<sup>6</sup> M.A.R. Colledge "Le temple de Bel à Palmyre: Qui l'a fait, et pourquoi?" in *Palmyre: Bilan et perspectives* (Strasbourg 1976), 51-52.

The oasis itself and the important area of farming territory to the North-West of the city<sup>7</sup> would have provided a significant area for development once the surrounding tribes began to co-operate in the establishment of the city. The new urban centre was thus provided with a perennial source of water as well as a wide area which could be exploited for the purposes of raising livestock, qualities which would prove to be of immense importance in the eastern commerce of the city. In his account of Palmyra, Pliny described the town as blessed by good lands and springs of water, despite its desert location: \_

Palmyra urbs nobilis situ, diuitiis soli et aquis amoenis, uasto undique ambitu harenis includit agros

Palmyra is a city famous for its location, for the richness of its soil and for its pleasant springs, and its fields are surrounded by a vast sea of sand<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the landowning aristocracy of the oasis and its surrounding territory were well placed to exploit the opportunities that the commerce presented when they arose.<sup>9</sup> Exactly how those opportunities came about, however, is a topic which deserves some consideration. Was Palmyra merely fortunate in its location, which allowed it to profit from trade which would have passed through the oasis or nearby anyway, or did the Palmyrenes themselves take action to ensure that the trade *did* come their way?

Some have tended to view Palmyra's commercial success as completely fortuitous, based entirely upon the location of the oasis upon the trade route from Mesopotamia into the Roman Empire which was then exploited by the inhabitants of

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<sup>7</sup> For this very important agricultural and pastoral area North-West of Palmyra see D. Schlumberger *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest* (Paris 1951).

<sup>8</sup> Pliny *NH* V. 21



the city.<sup>10</sup> However, an examination of the evidence seems to indicate that this was not the case. Despite the occasional comments to the contrary, the track across the desert from the Euphrates via the oasis of Palmyra is assuredly *not* a 'natural' one for caravans passing from Mesopotamia to the Roman East. This route is not mentioned by either Strabo or Isidore, both of whom describe routes which we might consider as far more 'natural': following (where possible) the Euphrates river which would thus provide the traveller with both a ready-made means of communication and water-supply, as well as frequent settlements which would ensure a good supply of food and shelter. None of these things are found in the desert around Palmyra. For Palmyra to become a commercial success required the Palmyrenes to *create* a trade route which passed through their city, and indeed this is what it seems they did.

Thus, far from the picture of the inhabitants of Palmyra finding themselves astride a rich route of international commerce, it seems probable that the Palmyrenes deliberately set about developing the route which passed through their oasis and thus *created* an international trade route. Routes across the desert such as the one through Palmyra cannot be maintained except where control is achieved over these tracks to the extent that the caravans can be protected from the depredations of desert tribesmen, as well as provided with points for water and shelter.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of such provisions, the only practical route is the one which crosses the Euphrates at Zeugma and passes through Mesopotamia to the head of the Gulf.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The significance of this aristocracy and their role with respect to the caravan trade will be explored fully in IV. 2 below.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. I.A. Richmond "Palmyra under the Aegis of Rome" *JRS* 53 (1963), 43.

<sup>11</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, this route seems to be the one that most non-Palmyrene merchants continued to take, even after the Palmyrene route was well established. In the corpus of commemorative caravan inscriptions from Palmyra which comprise our chief primary source for the trade, we find no reference to non-Palmyrene merchants using the route through Palmyra or participating in Palmyrene caravans. On one occasion Greek merchants are referred to, but these are only described as being resident in Seleucia, not necessarily involved in commerce passing through Palmyra.<sup>13</sup> The picture that we thus have of the development of Palmyrene commerce is not that of the city benefitting due to its position on the trade route, but that of the merchants of this oasis city, in concert with the landowning aristocracy of the town, deliberately utilising the city's qualities and contacts with the surrounding tribes to *develop* a trade route which enabled them to prosper. We should not think in terms of the city coming into existence due to the trade route, but of the trade route coming into existence due to the enterprise of the inhabitants of the city. Of course, once the trade was exploited the city was able to grow wealthy in ways it could not otherwise have done, but this should not obscure the fact that the commercial vocation of Palmyra was the result of an initiative of its citizens, not the chance location of its oasis. The lengths to which the Palmyrenes would go, both diplomatically and militarily, to preserve and enhance this commerce will become apparent as we continue to study the trade which came through the city.

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<sup>13</sup> *Inv.* IX. 6. This inscription of A.D. 19 was erected by Palmyrene and Greek merchants at Seleucia honouring a benefactor of the temple of Bel at Palmyra. While it may thus be argued that the Greeks so honoured a benefactor of this temple only because they had interests in Palmyra, it should also be recognised that this inscription dates from the very earliest period of the Palmyrene commerce, and there is no similar mention anywhere else in the Palmyrene corpus. It would thus be extremely dangerous to argue for the participation of Greeks in Palmyrene caravans based upon this reference

Another mistaken impression which is often stated is that the opportunity which enabled Palmyra to expand its trade was the decline of the Nabataean kingdom and its annexation by Rome in A.D. 106.<sup>14</sup> While it is certainly true that Palmyrene trade does appear from the caravan inscriptions to have increased in intensity soon after the Roman annexation of the Nabataean kingdom, there are some factors which would seem to negate this view. First, as discussed earlier, the alleged 'decline' of the Nabataean kingdom in the late first century has often been heavily overstated, and such evidence that there is suggests that the trade of the kingdom in fact continued well into the Roman period.<sup>15</sup> We must also bear in mind the actual lines of trade and the articles being traded, for as has been demonstrated our sources always state that the trade of the Nabataean kingdom was in incenses such as frankincense and myrrh, which were obtained from southern Arabia. The trade of Palmyra, by contrast, was not in these commodities: there would be no practical reason to bring incense from southern Arabia to Mesopotamia and thence to Palmyra as this would be a ridiculously circuitous route and far more expensive than the relatively direct one through Petra. Indeed, Appian informs us that Palmyrene trade was conducted in "Indian and Arabian goods from Persia",<sup>16</sup> so it is clear that the trade of the Nabataean kingdom and that of Palmyra were not related. Thus, events or influences on one line of trade would not necessarily influence the other, and the Roman annexation of the Nabataean kingdom in A.D. 106 can have had little or no effect on the developing trade passing through Palmyra.

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alone, particularly in view of the absence of any similar references throughout the remainder of Palmyrene history.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 74; J.-P. Rey-Coquais "Syrie romaine", 54-56; J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 43.

Similarly this disproves the assumption that the Romans 'preferred' to send their trade through Palmyra and the Red Sea rather than through Arabia, thus accounting for both the rise of Palmyra and the 'decline' of Petra.<sup>17</sup> Quite apart from the fact that, at least in the case of Palmyra and Petra, the lines and articles of trade were different and unrelated, there is no compelling evidence to believe that the Romans ever 'preferred' to send their trade by any particular route. As has been seen on numerous occasions through this study, the Romans appear to have been content to allow the trade to develop unhindered, simply ensuring that they received the income from customs duties. We should therefore discard this hypothesis, and look elsewhere for the explanation of the rise of Palmyrene trade, if indeed such an explanation can be found at all.

### *Palmyrene Commerce in the Gulf*

The bilingual caravan inscriptions found at Palmyra, commemorating individuals who assisted the caravans in some way, confirm Appian's statement that Palmyrene trade was conducted chiefly with Persia. These inscriptions are in both Greek and, uniquely in a subject city of the Roman East, the Palmyrene dialect of Aramaic.<sup>18</sup> Although they do not mention the actual items in the trade, they frequently mention the individual who commanded the caravan (the *συνοδιάρχης*), the destination of the caravan and other details as well as the name of the honorand,

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<sup>15</sup> III. 2 & 4 above.

<sup>16</sup> Appian *BC* V. 9

<sup>17</sup> J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 74; J.-P. Rey-Coquais "Syrie Romaine", 56.

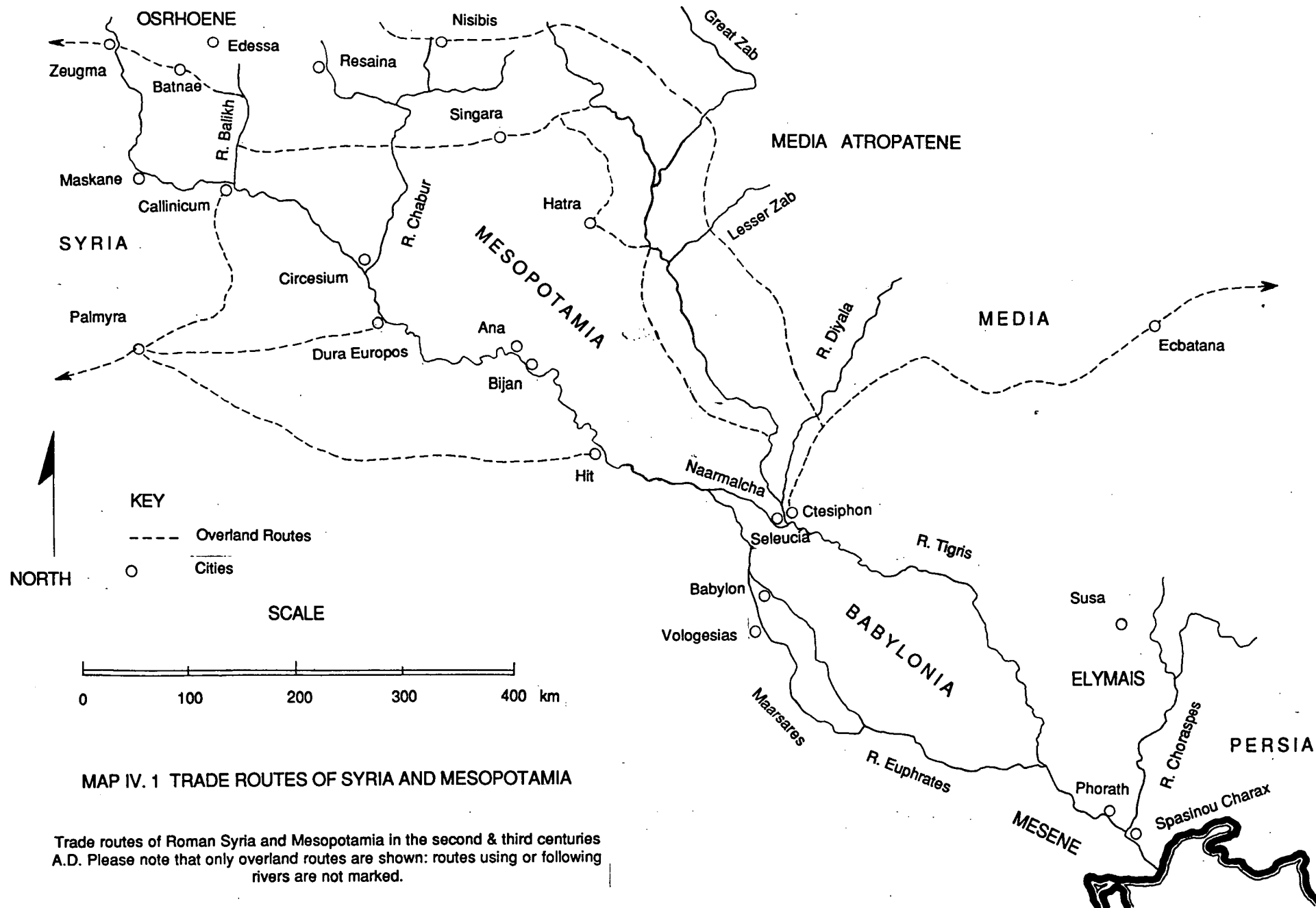
<sup>18</sup> For a brief list of these inscriptions see now M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32-33.

usually a Palmyrene official who has helped the caravan in some way.<sup>19</sup> These provide the chief primary source for the student of Palmyrene trade, and by an examination of them we can build up a reasonably coherent picture of this trade, the routes by which it was conveyed and, at least to some extent, the significance which the trade had to the city as a whole.

Those inscriptions which provide details about the destination of the caravans invariably describe expeditions which departed Palmyra and travelled to one of the cities of Mesopotamia and then returned. Others mention colonies of Palmyrene merchants in various places, while still others describe sea voyages from the Gulf to 'Scythia', which is northern India. Throughout all of them, a clear pattern of Palmyrene trade emerges: the caravans were not engaged in trade on the overland 'silk road', but were trading with cities in southern Mesopotamia which appear to have obtained their goods by sea from India.

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<sup>19</sup> For details of the organisation of the caravans and the caravan trade in general see IV. 2 below.



The earliest caravan inscriptions describe groups of Palmyrene merchants who appear to be resident in the cities of Seleucia and Babylon.<sup>20</sup> These, however, are the only occasions on which these cities are mentioned, and as they are very early (A.D. 19 & 24 respectively) it is probable that they represent an early stage in the development of Palmyrene commerce. Soon, however, the pattern emerges which the trade continues to follow for the remainder of its existence: the caravans travel chiefly to Spasinou Charax, the capital of the kingdom of Mesene on the Gulf, and after A.D. 140 to the city of Vologesias, further up the Euphrates but still on the route between Palmyra and the Gulf.<sup>21</sup> Of the inscriptions mentioning caravans or merchants involved in the caravan trade listed by Gawlikowski,<sup>22</sup> one each of them mention Seleucia or Babylon, one mentions Phorath, a site on the Gulf near Charax, eight mention Vologesias and sixteen mention Charax. When one considers the fact that a caravan travelling to Vologesias would probably be picking up goods which had been landed in Charax anyway, and that any caravan travelling to Charax would most probably pass through Vologesias on the Euphrates, it is clear that the vast bulk of Palmyrene trade was carried out along but one trade route: from Palmyra to the Euphrates, down the Euphrates to Vologesias, from thence to Charax (or possibly nearby Phorath), and then by ship to India. All that varied was the distance along the trade route that a caravan would travel: it might only go as far as Vologesias, while others might travel all the way to Charax, and according to some inscriptions a few

<sup>20</sup> *Inv.* IX. 6 (Seleucia); *Inv.* IX. 11 (Babylon).

<sup>21</sup> A. Maricq "Vologésias, l'emporium de Ctésiphon" *Syria* 36 (1959), 264-276 argued that Vologesias was located on the Tigris in the vicinity of Ctesiphon. However, this has been shown to be incorrect, and the true location of Vologesias has been demonstrated to have been on the Euphrates in the vicinity of Babylon. See M.-L. Chaumont "Etudes d'histoire parthe III. Les villes fondées par les Vologèse" *Syria* 51 (1974), 76-89.

<sup>22</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32-33.

Palmyrene merchants even took ship at Charax and sailed to the ports of northern India to trade.

The corpus of honorific inscriptions mention caravans at all these places, but as already noted the majority of them, commencing in the mid first century A.D., mention Spasinou Charax as their destination. A typical example from A.D. 81 reads as follows in the Greek text:

[Ζ]αβδιβωλον Ο[γ]ηλου το[ῦ] Αμ]-  
μαθου τοῦ Λαχει Παλμυρη[ου]  
οἱ ἀπὸ Σπασίνου Χάρακος ἀν[αβ]-  
άντες Παλμυρηνοὶ ἔμπορο[ι]  
τειμῆς χάριν.

To Zabdibol son of Ogeilu son of Ammat son of A'aqi the Palmyrene, the Palmyrene merchants who have ascended from Spasinou Charax (dedicated this) in his honour.<sup>23</sup>

Judging by the appearance of these inscriptions at this time, it would seem likely that Palmyrene trade with the Gulf was established at some time during the course of the first century A.D. The frequency of the mention in the inscriptions of the port of Spasinou Charax, capital of the Parthian vassal state of Mesene, shows that this emporium played a central role in the trade of Palmyra. It would appear that Charax obtained most of the goods which subsequently found their way to Palmyra by the sea route from India, and that Palmyrene shipowners were also involved in this area of the trade. The participation of Palmyrenes in this part of the commerce is demonstrated by another honorific inscription from Palmyra, which reads:

Μάρκον Οὐλπ[ιο]ν Ιαραιον Λιρα[νου]  
τοῦ Αβγαρου υἱ[ὸν] τὸν φιλόπατριν·  
[ἐ]μποροι οἱ ἀν[αχ]θέντες ἀπὸ Σκυθ[ίας]  
[ἐν] πλύω Ονα[ιν]ου Αδδουδανου τοῦ  
[. . . .], πάση προ]θυμία βοηθήσαντα

<sup>23</sup> *Inv.* X. 40



αὐτοῖς καὶ συναζόμενον, τειμῆς  
χάριν, Δύστω τοῦ ηξὺ ἔτους.

To Marcus Ulpius Iarhai son of Hairan, son of Abgar, the patriot, the merchants who have returned from Scythia on the ship of Honainu son of Haddudan son of . . . , having helped and assisted them with great willingness, (dedicated this) in his honour, in the month Dystos in the year 468 (A.D. 157).<sup>24</sup>

This inscription demonstrates that Palmyrenes participated in the furthest stages of the trade with India, as well as in the caravan trade to the Gulf. The images of ships in Palmyrene funerary sculpture also attest to the fact that many Palmyrene merchants were shipowners who were involved in the trade between India and Spasinou Charax.<sup>25</sup>

The existence of this sea trade enables us to gain some insight into the kinds of goods which the Palmyrenes obtained from northern India, for the ports at which the ships from Charax docked in 'Scythia' were almost certainly the same ports at which ships from Egypt docked, Barygaza and Barbarikon.<sup>26</sup> It would thus seem most reasonable that the Palmyrenes obtained the same goods as did the Greek traders from Egypt, and if this is so then the detailed accounts of the goods and transactions contained in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* in its account of the trade between India and Egypt applies also to the trade between India and the Gulf.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that the routes from Egypt and Charax reached the same terminus, it would seem that there was no relationship between the two lines of trade, and they continued to be operated separately. There is no evidence of a classical

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<sup>24</sup> Inv. X. 96

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. M.A.R. Colledge *The Art of Palmyra* (London 1976), 76, pl. 103. The presence of Palmyrenes in the Gulf is also attested by the discovery of a Palmyrene tomb on the island of Kharg. See R. Ghirshman "L'île de Kharg dans le Golfe Persique" *CRAI* (1958), 265-268.

<sup>26</sup> J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> For this trade see II. 1 above.

circumnavigation of Arabia, and the author of the *Periplus* seems quite uninformed about the Gulf itself, in contrast to his extensive first-hand knowledge about the remainder of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>28</sup> Salles' suggestion, however, that this was because the Gulf was closed to Roman shipping and restricted to 'Arab' (i.e. Palmyrene and Characene) control,<sup>29</sup> would seem to be excessive and unsupported. In support of his contention, Salles notes that the amount of knowledge about the Gulf in Roman sources such as the *Periplus* is dramatically less than that which was known to the Hellenistic sources.<sup>30</sup> That this is certainly true no-one can deny, but it still does not seem to justify Salles' conclusion. It would appear more likely that the greater knowledge of the Hellenistic geographers stems more from the easier *land* access available to them: before the rise of the Parthian state the Seleucids dominated this area and land access would have been relatively easy at that time. In the Roman period, however, access, though not necessarily cut off, would still have been more difficult, and in any case the merchants of Alexandria who financed the ships from Egypt would simply have had no reason to send their ships to the head of the Gulf. This, not the enforcement of any ban on Roman shipping in the Gulf, is what caused the relative ignorance of Roman writers with regard to this area. In view of this, Casson's statement that the writer of the *Periplus* ignores the region of the Gulf because it was of no interest to Roman shippers<sup>31</sup> appears to be sound.

Salles' theory is also difficult to reconcile with the status of Palmyra and Mesene at the time. Palmyra was a subject city of the Roman Empire, and it is not

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<sup>28</sup> J.-F. Salles "La circumnavigation de l'Arabie dans l'antiquité classique" in J.-F. Salles (ed.) *L'Arabie et ses mers bordières*, 96.

<sup>29</sup> J.-F. Salles "Découvertes du Golfe Arabo-Persique aux époques grecque et romaine" *REA* 94 (1992), 94.

likely that Rome would have taken kindly to such a city participating in a blockade of Roman interests. It is equally unlikely that the Parthians and Characenes would have considered the Palmyrenes, inhabitants of a city in the Roman Empire, as anything other than Romans themselves. The idea that there might have been some sort of 'Arab co-operation' between Palmyrenes and Characenes against the intruding 'Western' Romans is little more than a projection of twentieth century politics onto an ancient reality which is far different. Even the idea that the Palmyrenes saw themselves or the Characenes as 'Arabs' is highly doubtful. If the Palmyrenes considered themselves to be Arabs it is then rather odd that in the third century Vaballathus would claim "Arabicus" as one of his victory titles.<sup>32</sup> It should also be borne in mind that, as will be seen, Palmyra and thus Rome exercised considerable influence in the Kingdom of Mesene during this period, which would once more make it unlikely that Mesene could or would attempt to blockade the Gulf against Roman shipping. Thus, the idea of a ban on Roman ships in the Gulf would appear to be unsupportable. 'Roman' ships *were* in the Gulf, for that is what the Palmyrene ships would have been considered; other Roman ships traded out of Egypt and would have had no reason to enter the Gulf.

### *The Kingdom of Mesene*

The political situation of Mesene, and the extent of Palmyrene and Roman influence within that kingdom, is a subject of vital importance in understanding the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>31</sup> L. Casson *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 333.

rise of the trade between Palmyra and the East. Palmyra has sometimes been understood as an 'intermediary' between the Parthian and the Roman realms, and it has been assumed that Palmyra strove to steer some sort of 'middle course' between the two powers. This view is derived from a statement of Pliny, who declared:

priuata sorte inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque, et prima in discordia semper utrimque cura.

It has its own fate between two great Empires, of the Romans and of the Parthians, and at the first discord is always the concern of both sides.<sup>33</sup>

This, however, was certainly not the case in Pliny's time and it may be that he is quoting an earlier source.<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, Palmyra had already been incorporated into the Roman Empire by Pliny's day, and, as will be discussed below, in later years Palmyrenes often held high Roman status, both equestrian and senatorial. These facts alone make it perfectly clear that Palmyra was by no means a neutral state between the two empires but rather an integral part of the Roman realm.

In view of this idea that Palmyra was a sort of 'neutral state' steering a course between two great powers, it is very interesting to note that there seems to be no evidence of any Palmyrene interests with the Parthian court itself. Rather, we find instead evidence of Palmyrenes active in the government and maintaining interests within the kingdom of Mesene, while seemingly all but ignoring the court of the Great King. Palmyrene interests in Mesene are evident from a very early stage. An inscription from the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, dated to about A.D. 18/19, states that a Palmyrene named Alexandros assumed embassies on behalf of Germanicus to the

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<sup>33</sup> Pliny *NH* V. 21

<sup>34</sup> E. Will "Pline l'Ancien et Palmyre: un problème d'histoire ou d'histoire littéraire?" *Syria* 62 (1985), 263-269.

kings of Mesene and Elymais.<sup>35</sup> The appointment of this Palmyrene to such embassies would make no sense were it not already the case that Palmyra had extensive interests in these kingdoms. Thus, it is clear that from the very beginning of Palmyrene commerce in the area in the first century A.D., relations were maintained with the kingdom of Mesene and other states in the area. It is also no doubt more than a coincidence that these interests were within an area of commercial contact: unquestionably these interests in Mesene arose from, or were designed to encourage, the commerce with the Gulf cities.

However, in the Antonine period the interests of Palmyra in the kingdom of Mesene, as well as the frequency of inscriptions describing caravans in the area, appear to have taken a quantum leap. There are, for example, a total of six caravan inscriptions from the period A.D. 19-131, whereas there are at least nineteen from the period A.D. 131-161. In addition, during this period there are inscriptions which attest to Palmyrenes holding positions of high authority under the kings of Mesene. Some of them are described variously as the satrap of Tylos (Bahrain), the archon of Phorath, and the archon of Maisan (i.e. Mesene).<sup>36</sup> Still more intriguing is the example of So'adu son of Bolyada, who appears to have been resident at Vologesias, held some power described as *δυναστεία* either there or at Palmyra (or possibly both), and was able to erect a temple of the Augusti in the city!<sup>37</sup>

The exact role or position held by So'adu and others like him, for example Marcus Ulpius Iarhai who will be discussed below, is quite unclear. We do not in fact

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<sup>35</sup> J. Cantineau "Textes palmyréniens provenant de la fouille du temple de Bel" *Syria* 12 (1931), 139-141.

<sup>36</sup> *Inv.* X. 38, 112; D. Schlumberger "Palmyre et la Mésène" *Syria* 38 (1961), 256, respectively.

<sup>37</sup> J.T. Milik *Dédicaces faites par des dieux* (Paris 1972), 12-14.

know *who* placed them in these positions, nor indeed what the real nature of their position was. It may for instance be that they were placed there by the Palmyrene government. Certainly they were honoured by the government, as in the inscription honouring So'adu cited above, but this is not proof that it was the government that placed them in their positions in the first place. Teixidor, on the other hand, considers that these individuals were the heads of tribal associations, not city appointments, based on the greater instance of tribal gods in their dedications as opposed to the city's chief divinity, Bel.<sup>38</sup> While this may be the case, the evidence is still tenuous and cannot be regarded as conclusive. There is certainly little or no reason to describe men such as So'adu as a kind of 'resident consul' of Palmyra, whose chief role was to support and protect their own countrymen. They may very well have, and obviously did, take upon themselves such tasks, but this is a long way from saying that they were specifically placed there by the Palmyrene authorities in order to undertake such a role. A far more likely explanation for the role of such people is that they were simply the head of the community of Palmyrene merchants in the city, presumably appointed to that position by the merchants themselves. Another possibility is that they held some local authority given to them by the kings of Mesene. Such positions were reasonably common, and it is at least possible that individuals such as So'adu or Iarhai were in fact Palmyrenes who held some local post of authority in Vologesias or Spasinou Charax, and were thus in a position to help their fellow-countrymen when they were in need. Whatever the case, it is certain that these people were able to wield an extraordinary amount of influence in the cities of Mesene.

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<sup>38</sup> J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 47-48.

It is clear that a political situation existed in Mesene which enabled Palmyrenes to hold high office in the kingdom, and even to honour the emperor of Rome there; both highly unusual in what has been thought to have been a vassal kingdom of the Parthian Empire.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, either this political situation or the Palmyrene influence which it made possible appears to have been very conducive to Palmyrene commerce, as the increased number of caravan inscriptions from this time attests.

A recently published inscription from Seleucia appears to shed some light on this question, allowing us to explain this seemingly extensive influence of a Roman city within a kingdom which has been regarded as a Parthian vassal. This inscription was engraved upon a bronze statue of Herakles in Seleucia, and reveals that the statue was taken from Mesene by the Parthian king Vologeses III when he invaded Mesene:

Ἔτους τοῦ  
καθ' Ἑλλήνας  
ΒΞΥ βασιλεὺς  
βασιλέων Ἀρ-  
σάκης Ὀλογάσος,  
υἱὸς Μιραδάτου βα-  
σιλέως, ἐπεστρα-  
τεύσατο Μεσσήνη  
κατὰ Μιραδάτου βασι-  
λέως υἱοῦ Πακόρου τοῦ  
προβασιλεύσαντος, καὶ  
τὸν Μιραδάτην βασιλέ-  
α ἐγδιώξας τῆς Μεσσήνης  
ἐγένετο ἐγκρατὴς ὅλης  
τῆς Μεσσήνης, καὶ εἰκόνα  
ταύτην χαλκῇν Ἡρακλέ-  
ους θεοῦ, τὴν μετενεχθει-  
σαν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῆς Μεσσή-  
νης, ἀνέθηκεν ἐν ἱερῷ τοῦ  
δε θεοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τοῦ  
χαλκῆς πύλης προκατα-  
θεμένου.

<sup>39</sup> S.A. Nodelman "A Preliminary History of Characene" *Berytus* 13 (1960), 111.

In the year 462 by the Greek reckoning (A.D. 150/151) the King of Kings Arsaces Vologeses, son of Meredates (i.e. Mithradates) the king, campaigned in Mesene against Meredates the king, the son of Pacorus who was king before, and having pursued Meredates the king from Mesene he became the ruler of all Mesene, and when this bronze statue of Herakles the god had been brought by him from Mesene, he set it up in the temple of the god Apollo with the bronze gates in front.<sup>40</sup>

This inscription, together with the apparently anomalous Palmyrene influence which seems to have existed in Mesene in the second century, allows us to reinterpret the history of the region at this time, and explain the sudden rise in significance of the Palmyrene caravan traffic in the same period.

Bowersock and Bernard have both suggested that the Herakles inscription, together with the evidence for Palmyrene involvement in the kingdom, implies that Mesene was in fact a Roman client kingdom for some time in the second century A.D.<sup>41</sup> This would explain then the influence which Palmyrenes were able to wield within Mesene, particularly the ability of So'adu to erect a temple of the Augusti at Vologesias which is otherwise difficult to explain, and it would explain why Vologeses of Parthia attacked Mesene and removed its king from his throne in A.D. 150/151. Vologeses' attack in this year is perhaps best understood as the beginning of a new aggressive stance against Rome by a newly crowned king: unwilling to attack Rome directly, he desired instead to remove a source of Roman influence in, as it were, his 'own back yard', and so attacked Mesene.<sup>42</sup> The influence of Palmyrenes is far more readily explained by the hypothesis of Mesene being a Roman client

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<sup>40</sup> F.A. Pennacchietti "L'iscrizione bilingue greco-parthica dell'Eracle di Seleucia" *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), 169-186.

<sup>41</sup> G.W. Bowersock "La Mésène (Maison) antonine" in T. Fahd (ed.) *L'Arabie préislamique*, 159-168; P. Bernard "Vicissitudes au gré de l'histoire d'une statue en bronze d'Héraclès entre Séleucie du Tigre et la Mésène" *Journal des Savants* 1990, 3-68.

<sup>42</sup> D. Potter "The Inscription on the Bronze Herakles from Mesene: Vologeses IV's War with Rome and the Date of Tacitus' *Annales*" *ZPE* 88 (1991), 284.



kingdom: under the rule of a king friendly to Rome, it is hardly surprising that notable and influential people from Palmyra who already held commercial interests in the area might be elevated to high rank in the local government of parts of the kingdom, particularly those parts closely associated with the caravan trade such as Vologesias. Such influence would then also afford many opportunities to help and expand the caravan traffic. The son of A'abi, for example, who was a Palmyrene but was archon of Maisan (Mesene) was honoured for having "favoured his native city and its merchants",<sup>43</sup> so it is clear that these Palmyrenes with positions of power and influence in Mesene were able and willing to favour the caravans from Palmyra, which no doubt would in turn make more merchants willing to make the trip, increasing the volume of the commerce and the wealth it generated at Palmyra.

The most likely time for this Roman influence to have commenced would seem to have been during Trajan's Parthian campaign. Dio Cassius records that Trajan was received hospitably at Spasinou Charax by Athambelus, the dynast of Mesene, and that he "remained loyal" to Trajan even when compelled to pay tribute.<sup>44</sup> Even though Hadrian formally renounced Trajan's conquests, it is possible that he retained some influence in Mesopotamia, and the continuing clientship of the king of Mesene could quite conceivably be just such an area of influence.<sup>45</sup>

Although such Roman influence is far more likely to have been to ensure that the Parthian king was surrounded by Roman clients rather than to secure trade concessions,<sup>46</sup> the effect of the Roman influence in Mesene seems to have been to

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<sup>43</sup> D. Schlumberger "Palmyre et la Mésène", 256.

<sup>44</sup> Dio LXVIII. 28

<sup>45</sup> G.W. Bowersock "La Mésène (Maisan) antonine", 166.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

allow a rapid flourishing of Palmyrene commerce with the area. As we have seen, Palmyrenes, who probably already had trade interests in this region, were able to establish themselves in high political office in Mesene and so place themselves in a better position to offer help and encouragement to caravans. These circumstances no doubt greatly encouraged the Palmyrene traders, and so the frequency of the caravans appears to have intensified in the second century A.D. It seems that it was not A.D. 106, the Roman annexation of Petra, which was the crucial date in the expansion of Palmyrene commerce, but rather A.D. 114-117, the years of Trajan's campaigning in the East. Though the political gains to Rome from these campaigns were little, they were perhaps not as slight as has been thought, and certainly they provided the Palmyrene merchants with a valuable commercial opportunity which they did not let slip.

Despite the fact that the acceleration of Palmyrene commerce in Mesene was as a result of greater Roman influence in the area, the capture of Mesene by the Parthian king in A.D. 150/151 does not appear to have halted this trade. Indeed, the series of eight caravan inscriptions honouring Marcus Ulpius Iarhai all date from the period A.D. 156-159, so it is clear that the caravan trade continued throughout this period. However, it should be remembered that caravan inscriptions were usually made in honour of someone who had helped the caravan in some difficulty it may have encountered. Accordingly, the inscriptions honouring Iarhai may not necessarily be an indication of greater *frequency* of caravans but of greater *difficulty* encountered by them at this time. At this time Iarhai, who seems to have been resident in Charax though in what capacity we do not know, appears to have successfully met the

challenges created by the change of regime at Charax and enabled the Palmyrene commerce to continue.<sup>47</sup> It may be that in the confused conditions following the Parthian takeover, Iarhai was able to exercise whatever influence he had in Mesene to ensure that Palmyrene caravans were once more allowed to enter the kingdom, although by the dates of the inscriptions this may not have been possible until A.D. 156. We should, however, take note that it seems to have been a Palmyrene who strove to get the commerce going again: neither Roman nor Parthian ever seems to have been so interested in the overland commerce as to allow it to dictate their policy.

This is further borne out by the fact that, when war broke out between Rome and Parthia under Lucius Verus in A.D. 162, the series of caravan inscriptions cease and only recommence after the death of Vologeses in 192. Indeed, from the corpus of dated caravan inscriptions it would seem that the commerce ground to a halt whenever war between the two powers broke out,<sup>48</sup> so it is quite apparent that the caravan traffic was not a great priority in setting either Roman or Parthian foreign policy. From this fact alone it is apparent that the Romans, or for that matter the Parthians, did not consider the commercial traffic important enough to take into account in their decisions to go to war; it is thus even less likely that the needs of the caravan traffic would provide a *motive* for action.

The vital significance of Mesene in Palmyra's eastern commerce should be regarded as firmly established. All the evidence in our possession indicates that the merchants of Palmyra were not wide-ranging in search of their merchandise: on the contrary they seem to have confined their attentions almost exclusively to the one

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>48</sup> J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 49-54.

trade route which ran from Palmyra, across the desert in the manner described below, down the Euphrates to Charax, and thence to India by sea. The continuation of Palmyra's prosperity thus hinged upon their diplomacy which was able to keep the Indian and Gulf end of their trade route open, and on their control of the desert which was able to keep the trade flowing through the oasis of Palmyra itself and on to the markets of the Roman Empire.

### *The Overland Traffic to the Mediterranean*

At the opposite end of this trade route which ran from Palmyra to India, we have the problem of exactly how the caravans came and went between Mesopotamia, Palmyra and the Mediterranean. Gawlikowski has suggested that the Palmyrene traders made use of the Euphrates river whenever possible, only traversing the desert as far as was necessary, then taking to boats once the river was reached.<sup>49</sup> This is supported by the fact that there seem to have been garrisons of Palmyrene archers at various points along the river, notably at 'Ana and Bijan, both islands in the Euphrates.<sup>50</sup> While the exact status and significance of these garrisons will be discussed further on,<sup>51</sup> for now it is sufficient to note that they are evidence for a strong Palmyrene interest in the Euphrates valley, probably resulting from their use of the river for the transport of their commerce after it had traversed the desert to the riverbank.

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<sup>49</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Le commerce de Palmyre sur terre et sur eau" in J.-F. Salles (ed.) *L'Arabie et ses mers bordières*, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. For the excavations at 'Ana, see A. Northedge, A. Bamber & M. Roaf (eds.) *'Ana, Excavations of the British Archaeological Expedition at Qal'a Island 1981-2* (Warminster 1988); for those at Bijan see M. Gawlikowski "Bijan in the Euphrates" *Sumer* 42 (1985), 15-21.

<sup>51</sup> IV. 3 below.

There are several possibilities for the point at which caravans leaving Palmyra for Charax could have reached the river and commenced the riverine part of their journey. These no doubt varied according to whether the caravan was heading downstream on its way to Charax or upstream on its return, and also according to the degree of navigability of the river at different times of the year. One of the best attested routes is that between Palmyra and Hit on the Euphrates, which was furnished with a formed road and several caravanserais for protection and shelter.<sup>52</sup> The Palmyrene posts further upstream, however, demonstrate that Hit was not the only point at which Palmyrene traffic reached the Euphrates. Possibly Hit was the point at which riverine traffic disembarked on the upstream leg of the journey, whereas caravans heading downstream would proceed from Palmyra to a closer point on the river before taking ship. The pack animals could then be grazed and slowly moved to Hit (or to whatever point ships travelling upstream could reach) while they awaited the return of the caravan.<sup>53</sup> Whatever the exact location of the embarkation and disembarkation points, the far cheaper costs of riverine transport in the ancient world when compared to those of overland transportation would make it much more probable that Palmyrene traffic made use of the route via the Euphrates rather than crossing the desert all the way to Mesopotamia. Within the area of desert which had to be crossed prior to reaching the river, caravans followed prepared routes which were provided with caravanserais, presumably by the Palmyrene authorities, and were protected against nomads and bandits by the Palmyrene caravan guards, which are one

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<sup>52</sup> For this road and the installations on it see R. Mouterde & A. Poidebard "La voie antique des caravanes entre Palmyre et Hit au II<sup>ème</sup> Siècle ap. J.C." *Syria* 12 (1931), 111-115; D.L. Kennedy & D.S. Riley *Rome's Desert Frontier*, 80-81, 89-93, 212.

<sup>53</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 31.

of the most intriguing and unusual aspects of Palmyra's role within the Roman Empire. These guards will be discussed in detail further on in the work.<sup>54</sup>

Thus it can be seen that Palmyrene commerce generally followed one route (at least as far as we can tell by the available evidence). Caravans would depart Palmyra, traverse the desert to the nearest point at which the Euphrates was navigable at that time, and then take ship for the journey down the river. The river could be followed all the way to Vologesias or to Charax, where goods which had been transported there from India could be purchased. After these transactions were complete, the caravan would once again take ship and return up the Euphrates to the furthest point upstream at which it was navigable, where the pack animals would be waiting for the return journey to Palmyra. As to what happened to the goods once they reached Palmyra, we have little or no evidence, but one might presume that they were conveyed to the Mediterranean ports and from there to the markets of the Empire.

One inscription seems to indicate that the goods were transported to Antioch, where the 25% tax was levied. This inscription mentions an individual who was councillor at Antioch as well as a collector of the 25% tax,<sup>55</sup> which seems to indicate that Antioch was a place for the collection of this customs duty. Unless there were some other ports along the Mediterranean seaboard where this tax was levied as well, it seems likely that Palmyrene commerce was directed to Antioch after its arrival in Syria, and there subjected to government levies. From Antioch, the goods could have been distributed throughout the Roman world.

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<sup>54</sup> IV. 3 below.

<sup>55</sup> *Inv.* X. 29

## *Conclusion*

It appears that Palmyra was a city deeply involved in the caravan commerce with the East, particularly in the second century A.D. As we have seen, however, this commerce did not enrich the oasis city merely because Palmyra happened to be situated upon an international trade route. Instead, the flourishing of the commerce through Palmyra and the wealth which it brought to the city can be attributed directly to the enterprise and initiative of the Palmyrenes themselves, who made the journeys to the head of the Arabian Gulf and even to India to obtain the goods, and then brought them through Palmyra to the markets of the Mediterranean. The trade routes, the caravanserais, the caravan guards and many other factors were each either the initiatives of the Palmyrene government or of Palmyrene individuals, and the evidence for either Roman or Parthian interest in or development of this trade route is non-existent.

This commerce appears to have ground to a halt in 162 with the start of the war of Lucius Verus, and the series of caravan inscriptions does not recommence until A.D. 192, after the death of Vologeses III of Parthia. In the preceding years, however, these caravans seem to have brought enormous wealth to the oasis of Tadmor. Indeed, it would seem that it received sufficient wealth and power that, when the commerce was threatened again in the third century, Palmyra would not be content to sit back and wait until the trade could safely resume. Instead, she had the means and the will to take matters into her own hands, and this, as shall be seen, was exactly what the Palmyrenes did.

## IV.2 The Organisation of the Caravan Trade

A question which has caused some considerable interest has been the internal organisation of the caravans which travelled from Palmyra to the Gulf, and the types of Palmyrene citizens who could be found involved in the caravan trade. This is an important issue because, as will be examined further on in this chapter, the participation of various elements of Palmyrene society in the caravan trade can give us some insight into that society and into some important differences between the Palmyrene societal structure and that of other ancient cities.

### *Views of Palmyrene Society and the Caravan Trade*

The Palmyrene inscriptions relevant to the caravan trade have been frequently studied, and have most recently been listed and summarised by Gawlikowski.<sup>56</sup> A particularly noteworthy aspect of this list is the recurring official and/or semi-official positions which are mentioned within the inscriptions, either as honorand or dedicand. We can distinguish several different roles, notably that of the *synodiarch* and the *archemporos*, as well as numerous other individuals who usually appear as the honorand of the inscription, and who have been usually grouped under the general appellation of the 'patron' or 'protector' of the caravan. Such individuals as M. Ulpius Iarhai and So'adu son of Bolyada who are described as 'helping' the caravans or assisting in some more specific way are important examples of the latter group. From these inscriptions, then, it ought to be possible to build up some sort of picture of the

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<sup>56</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32-33.



organisation of the caravan trade, and then use this information to come to some understanding of Palmyrene society.

This methodology has, indeed, been used on previous occasions. Rostovtzeff was perhaps the first to do so, and he came to the conclusion that these patrons as well as the *synodiarchs* and the others mentioned in the inscriptions were evidence for a class of 'merchant-princes', whom he described as the true rulers of Palmyra.<sup>57</sup> In what has been probably the most important and influential contribution to this study, however, Ernest Will substantially revised this understanding,<sup>58</sup> and it has been his viewpoint which has generally held the field since.<sup>59</sup>

In his study, Will established a difference between the caravan leader, the *synodiarch* or in some later inscriptions the *archemporos*, and the patron or protector of the caravan who was usually the honorand of the commemorative inscription. This fact is demonstrated by several inscriptions which make a clear distinction between the caravan leader and the patron who has fulfilled some other role (often unspecified) which has helped the caravan. The *synodiarch* was seen by Will as a professional, a specialist who was hired by a group of merchants to organise the caravan and convey its goods to its destination (usually Charax) and back.<sup>60</sup> The patron, by contrast, Will sees as usually filling the role of financial backer, someone who provided both money and beasts of burden, as well as in some cases armed

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<sup>57</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff "Les inscriptions caravanières de Palmyre" in *Mélanges Gustave Glotz* II (Paris 1932), 792-811.

<sup>58</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre" *Syria* 34 (1957), 262-277.

<sup>59</sup> See e.g. J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 80; J.F. Matthews "The Tax Law of Palmyra", 169; J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 18; R. Stoneman *Palmyra and its Empire* (Ann Arbor 1991), 63; M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 31.

<sup>60</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre", 268.

retainers, to enable the caravan to reach its destination safely.<sup>61</sup> In this view, the caravan leader is sometimes seen as a sort of subordinate of the patron: indeed, in some cases the leader is the son of the patron. Will, however, sees this as a somewhat unusual arrangement, and draws a distinction between these caravan leaders and an 'ordinary' caravan leader.<sup>62</sup>

In describing the financial and support role of the caravan's patron, Will emphasised that these people could not have been merchants themselves, but must have possessed considerable estates and wealth from which they could provide both the necessary financial backing and particularly the beasts of burden which would have been required for such an expedition.<sup>63</sup> The evidence for such estates has been excavated in the area to the North-West of Palmyra, where there are considerable remains of substantial estates which would have been able to provide the necessary animals and other support which the expedition would require.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Will described a system whereby the rich herding magnates of the city involved themselves in the trade by providing the financial backing and logistical support which made the expeditions possible, and the gratitude of the merchants for this involvement is reflected in the caravan inscriptions.

The dependence of the Palmyrene caravans on these herding estates to the North-West of the city is undoubtedly sound. The trade must have been dependent on the involvement of the magnates who owned these estates, as only they would have been in a position to finance these expeditions and to provide them with the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 269-270.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 271-273.

logistical support that they needed. Indeed, the fact that those involved in the support of the caravan trade may have derived at least a proportion of their wealth from these estates is possibly shown by an inscription from Palmyra. This inscription appears to mention pastoral holdings which were owned by Marcus Ulpius Abgar, who is elsewhere attested in caravan inscriptions.<sup>65</sup> If this is indeed the case, then it seems that Abgar was involved in both pastoral activities and the caravan trade: he would thus appear to fit the model of a wealthy pastoralist who became involved in directing caravans.

The fact that it was these magnates who made the caravan trade possible also has implications for the origin of Palmyra's rise to importance. We must reject both of the oft-stated assertions that Palmyra rose to prominence because of the Romans' favouring the Palmyrene route over the path through Petra or any other track, and that Palmyra rose to prominence because of its fortuitous siting on a caravan route. It is clear that Palmyra became an important trading centre because of the efforts of these men who exploited their estates and their knowledge of the desert to *create* a trade route and made it possible for the merchants of Palmyra to become involved in the long distance trade. Who, however, *were* these men, and what role do we find for them revealed in the caravan inscriptions? What is their relationship to the *synodiarchs* and the *archemporoi*?

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<sup>64</sup> D. Schlumberger *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest*; E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre", 271.

<sup>65</sup> J. Teixidor "Deux inscriptions palmyréniennes du musée de Bagdad" *Syria* 40 (1963), 33-34.

### *The Organisation of the Caravan Trade*

The first thing which needs to be noted is that, upon a close examination of the caravan inscriptions, the class of 'patron' or 'protector' of the caravan does not really appear to exist. What we find instead among those honorands in the inscriptions who are not the actual leaders of the caravans in question are a variety of individuals who appear to have performed a wide range of services for the caravan, some of which are specified and some of which are not. Thus, if we imagine that these people are being honoured for some *specific* help which they provided for the caravan rather than any generalised regular role, there is in fact no need at all to postulate the regular role of the 'patron' of the caravan.

Indeed, when the corpus of caravan inscriptions is examined it is apparent that many of the dedicands are in fact being honoured for some specific assistance, and we do not need to suppose that these individuals had any other role or involvement with the caravan in question beside that for which they are being honoured. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this type are those inscriptions where some military assistance is being commemorated. One inscription from the temple of Baalshamin describes an event of this sort: it would appear that a caravan under Hagegu and Taimarsu came into some difficulty, most probably a nomad attack, and was saved by a military force of some sort led by So'adu the son of Bolyada. While the exact nature and purpose of such Palmyrene military forces will be discussed in the next section, for now it is enough to note that So'adu does not appear to have had any other involvement in this caravan other than that of providing military help. There is simply no indication in the inscription that So'adu was any kind of 'protector' of the caravan

or financial patron: it is far more likely that he was present or nearby with a force of Palmyrene military guarding the caravan routes at a time when the caravan came under attack by nomads, and was thus able to repel the attack and save the caravan.<sup>66</sup> As far as the inscription goes, So'adu's involvement with the caravan under Hagegu and Taimarsu began and ended with his military intervention to save it, and we have no compelling reason to suppose that he had any other interest in it.

Similarly, we find occasions when an official of a foreign power, often a Palmyrene himself, has helped a caravan or a group of merchants and is honoured by them. In one case, a caravan which had come from Charax and Vologesias recognised the help given them by the archon of Phorath, a port in the territory of Charax:

τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου, ἀρχοντα  
 Φορθῶν τῆς περὶ Σπασίνου  
 Χαρακᾶ ἢ μετὰ Μαλχού τοῦ  
 Ἀζίζου παραγενομένη  
 ἀπὸ τοῦ Χαρακὸς εἰς Παλμυρα  
 (καὶ) Ὀλογαίσιαν συνοδία, τειμῆς  
 ἔνεκεν, ἔτ[ο]υς ανυ',  
 μηνὸς Γορπιαίου.

To . . . son of Alexandros, archon (?) of Phorath near Spasinou Charax, the caravan with Malku son of Azizu which has come from Charax to Palmyra and Vologesias (dedicated this) in his honour, in the year 451, in the month Gorpaios (A.D. 140).<sup>67</sup>

In this instance it would seem that the archon of Phorath has, probably in his official capacity, been of some assistance to the caravan. It is not hard to imagine some way in which such an official might have extended his patronage to the caravan to help it along its way, but there is no reason given in the inscription to suppose that this man

<sup>66</sup> *Baalshamin* III. no. 45; see also the unpublished inscription from the Allat temple at Palmyra noted by Gawlikowski ("Palmyra as a Trading Centre", no. 15, p. 32) for a similar occurrence. For summaries of these inscriptions see Appendix C.

<sup>67</sup> *Inv.* X. 112

had any association with or interest in the caravan prior to its arrival at Charax. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine how a man in such a place as Phorath could have been associated with the preparations for a caravan in far-off Palmyra. Again, we cannot find any evidence for the regular role of caravan 'patron' in this inscription; instead we again find the members of a caravan honouring a person who has helped them at some point along their journey, in this case no doubt in assisting them during their stay within his own dominions in the territory of Phorath. Once more, the inscription gives no indication of any particular interest or involvement held by the archon in the caravan except for the help which he gave it while it was at Phorath.

Another type of inscription which appears to confirm this general pattern is that which honours Roman authorities. In one case, dated at A.D. 135, a caravan which has returned from Charax with its leader honours a Roman centurion, Julius Maximus, although the reason for this honour is not specified.<sup>68</sup> In another which was mentioned in the previous section, from A.D. 161, a caravan returned from Charax under Nesa son of Bolyada honoured Marcus Aemilius Marcianus Asclepiades, a councillor of Antioch and a collector of the *τετάρτη* (25% customs duty).<sup>69</sup> Again, the specific reason for this honour is not mentioned. In both these cases, although the actual reason for the dedication is not specified, there is no good reason to suppose that these individuals were necessarily persons with a direct involvement, financial or otherwise, in the caravan. Given the parallels above, it would seem far more likely that these persons assisted the caravan in some way in the course of their duties, most probably involving the collection of customs dues or something similar. Regardless of

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<sup>68</sup> *Inv.* X. 81

<sup>69</sup> *Inv.* X. 29

whether or not this is the case, we cannot find any support for the regular role of 'caravan patron' in these inscriptions.

With the examples of these types of inscriptions in mind, it would be pertinent to re-examine those inscriptions more usually cited as examples of the 'caravan patron' to see if they do indeed justify the conclusion that there was such a thing. These inscriptions are those mentioning Marcus Ulpius Iarhai and some which honour the So'adu mentioned earlier in regard to military intervention.<sup>70</sup> In the case of So'adu, the inscriptions seem to imply that he was resident in Vologesias and provided help to the caravans passing through that location. In the inscription concerning him mentioned above, after the report of his "saving" the caravan comes a general statement that he helped citizens, caravans and merchants in Vologesias. As has been discussed earlier,<sup>71</sup> he would appear to have done this while he was resident in some official capacity in Vologesias, either as the head of the Palmyrene community there or in some official capacity under the Kings of Mesene.

Whatever help So'adu gave to the caravans was done while he was living in Vologesias, and should be separated from the military assistance mentioned in the earlier inscription which would most probably have been within Palmyrene territory. Thus, the help which So'adu gave to his fellow-countrymen in Vologesias is probably similar to that given to Palmyrene caravans by the archon of Phorath mentioned earlier, and by other Palmyrenes in official positions within the kingdom of Mesene

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<sup>70</sup> For a recent list of these inscriptions see M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32-33.

<sup>71</sup> IV. 1 above.

who are also honoured in various inscriptions.<sup>72</sup> Again, there is no need to imagine So'adu as having any pecuniary interest in the caravan, let alone being its organiser and prime financier. Rather, we should envisage him as an important and powerful resident of Vologesias who was able to use his power and influence in that city to assist Palmyrene merchants, and who was honoured for this both by the merchants and by the council of Palmyra.

With this in mind, it is easy to see parallels with the inscriptions mentioning M. Ulpius Iarhai, perhaps the most commonly cited of the 'caravan protectors'. In some cases he is mentioned as a caravan leader, but on several other occasions Iarhai is honoured for helping either a caravan or merchants on a ship from India. In one example, dated A.D. 157, he is honoured for "helping in every way" a caravan from Charax which was led by his own son, Abgar:

[Μάρκον Οὔλπιον Ιαραίου] Αἰρα[νου τ]οῦ Αβγαρο[υ  
[ῆ] ἀναβάσα ἀπο Σπασίνου Χαρακο[ς]  
συνοδία ἧς ἡγήσατο Αβγαρος υἱό[ς]  
αὐτοῦ, βοηθήσαντα αὐτῇ παντὶ  
τρόπῳ, τειμῆς χάριν, ἔτους οὐ'  
μηνὸς Ἀρτεμισίου.

To Marcus Ulpius Iarhai son of Hairan Abgar, the caravan under his son Abgar which has come from Spasinou Charax (dedicated this) for helping it in every way, in his honour, in the year 470 in the month Artemision (A.D. 159).<sup>73</sup>

In these instances it is not so apparent as in other cases that Iarhai had nothing to do with the caravan besides whatever help he might have offered it, especially as he is the father of the *synodiarch* in the case cited above, and he himself acts in this capacity on another caravan. However, by the same token, it is very difficult to separate the

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Iarhai, Satrap of Tylos for the king of Mesene (*Inv.* X. 38); the archon of Mesene (M. Rostovtzeff, *Berytus* 2, 143); both of these were apparently Palmyrenes who held important positions within the kingdom of Mesene and who assisted the merchants of their native city.



roles of *synodiarch* and 'patron' when such a close relationship appears between leader and honorand, and when in at least one case Iarhai actually acted in the capacity of leader himself. In other cases where merchants have dedicated a statue to Iarhai, it seems that the services performed by him were carried out at Charax itself; at least one cites help *in* Charax and the others all state that the caravans came back from that place. Therefore it is at least possible that Iarhai was fulfilling the same sort of role at Charax as So'adu had performed in Vologesias a few years earlier: either head of the local Palmyrene community or some official capacity under the kings of Mesene. In either case, he would have been in a position to help the caravans, especially in the unsettled conditions which must have prevailed after the Parthian king recaptured Mesene in A.D. 150/151, and it is most likely that this is the help that is recognised in most of the caravan inscriptions honouring him. It is certainly the case that he had some interests in some caravans - especially the one of which he was the leader, and most likely the one led by his son, but this is still not evidence for the existence of a regular, separate role of 'caravan patron', and clearly not for the separation of such a role from that of *synodiarch*.

It would seem that there is no solid evidence for the existence of a 'patron' or 'protector' of the caravan in the way Will proposed. Rather, each of those honoured in the caravan inscriptions at Palmyra appears to have helped the caravan in some specific way, but without necessarily being involved in the caravan itself or having any financial interest in it. Certainly there may have been occasions on which the

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<sup>73</sup> *Inv.* X. 107

honorand *did* have some interest in the caravan, but this is not evidence that such a role existed on a regular basis.

### *The Synodiarch*

Having eliminated the role of 'patron' in this way, we are left with the problem of explaining who it was that organised the caravan, provided the necessary beasts of burden and other logistical requirements, and financed the expedition. Will, as has been noted, saw the caravan leader as a professional who was engaged by the caravan patron in order to lead the caravan on its journey. However, we have seen that there is not really sufficient evidence to support the existence of this class of 'patron' as a regular institution in the caravan trade, and so we are forced to look elsewhere for the kind of support which would undoubtedly have been essential in these kinds of expeditions.

Fortunately, however, we do not have to look far, for the example of Marcus Ulpius Iarhai provides a possible answer. Iarhai seems to have been a rich and influential man, as the caravan inscriptions in his honour certainly attest. The wealth of this family would seem to be based originally not on the caravan commerce but on agricultural and/or pastoral holdings near Palmyra, as was discussed earlier in this section. Thus, Iarhai seems to fall into that category of men identified by Will as the originators of the caravan commerce, the possessors of estates, beasts and money which enabled them to create the caravan trade through Palmyra and to exploit it by their knowledge of the desert routes and tribes and their possession of the means to maintain such a trade: in other words, the 'caravan patron'. However, as we have

already found, an examination of the corpus dealing with Iarhai reveals one inscription in which Iarhai is the *synodiarch* himself and another in which his son acted in this capacity. Will considered that this arrangement would be unusual, and stand in contrast to the more common arrangement where the caravan leader was an employee of the patron. But are we really justified in making such a conclusion? Could it not be that the one who provided the financial backing, the logistical support *and* led the caravan was none other than the *synodiarch* himself? This would certainly explain Iarhai's appearance as a caravan leader as well as apparent 'patron': for in this reconstruction there is in fact no difference between the two offices. The situation which Will saw as unusual, with a magnate such as Iarhai acting as leader, would thus in this reconstruction be a regular occurrence, and we would not be surprised to see a caravan financed by this family being led by Abgar, the son of the great Iarhai.

This view is given some support by a later inscription which appears to describe a caravan leader giving heavy financial support to a caravan at his own expense:

ἡ βουλ[ῆ καὶ ὁ δῆμος Ἰ]ούλιον  
 Αὐρηλιο[ν Σαλαμά]λλαθον  
 Μαλῇ τοῦ [Ἀβδαίου ἀ]ρχέμπορον,  
 ἀνακομίσα[ντα τὴν] συνοδίαν  
 προῖκα ἐξ ἰδίων, τειμῆς χάριν,  
 ἔτους θξϛ'.

The Council and the People to Julius Aurelius Salamallat, son of Male son of Abdai, chief merchant, who has brought back a caravan at his own expense, (dedicated this) in his honour, in the year 569 (A.D. 257/8).<sup>74</sup>

Although the fact that this act is honoured would indicate that the merchants themselves would normally have borne these costs, this inscription shows the

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<sup>74</sup> *Inv.* III. 13

*archemporos* (apparently a later term for *synodiarch*)<sup>75</sup> as a man of considerable means; indeed as someone of great wealth who was able to bear an expenditure normally (presumably) split up among all the members of the expedition. This act would seem to be, as Will recognised, one of the acts of *euergetism* common to the ancient world in which the rich contributed to the public good out of their own pocket.<sup>76</sup> This, however, should give us an insight into the kind of person who acted as a caravan leader: this is no employee or technician - Julius Aurelius Salamallat is clearly a rich, influential man who wishes to increase his political influence and power, and such an act of *euergetism* is one way he could do this. A similar case is that of 'Ogielu ben Maqqai, an influential military leader honoured with statues by order of the Council yet described as one who had led caravans on many occasions.<sup>77</sup> Again, it would seem that the situation of a rich, aristocratic magnate acting as caravan leader is not an unusual one.

Indeed, given these examples we might consider that this was in fact the regular situation: merchants wishing to go to Charax would approach one of the wealthy magnates of Palmyra, who had the wealth and the materials to support such an expedition. This man would both organise and lead the caravan, and on some occasions he would perform such services that the merchants would honour him with a commemorative inscription. In the course of its journey, however, the caravan might encounter any number of other difficulties, from hostile nomads to unhelpful customs officials, and in these circumstances the caravan might be assisted by a Palmyrene or

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<sup>75</sup> This would appear to be indicated by the absence of the mention of a *synodiarch* in this inscription and the fact that the *archemporos* appears to be fulfilling the role normally taken by the *synodiarch*.

<sup>76</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre", 270.

<sup>77</sup> *Inv.* X. 44

Roman in the area with sufficient power to help. This could especially be likely within the borders of the Kingdom of Mesene, where many Palmyrenes had risen to positions of great power and influence. Such a person was on many occasions honoured with a statue and inscription by the grateful merchants and their leader, but such honorands cannot be grouped together as a general class of 'patron': rather we should recognise them as individuals without any necessary interest in the caravan who helped it in various specific ways. To find the true 'patron' of the caravan; its financier, backer and protector, we need look no further than the *synodiarch* himself.

Of course, such patronage would not come without its price, and there is no doubt that the caravan leader expected to make a handsome profit from the venture. He could perhaps participate in the actual purchase of goods, and thus to an extent act as a merchant himself, or he could simply be paid by the participants in the caravan a fixed sum or percentage of the profit for his organisation and help. Also, there is the possibility, as will be discussed below, that he could have lent money to the merchants to enable them to purchase their stock, and thus collected the loan plus interest at the end of the journey. In any case, the opportunities for profit for both the merchants and for the caravan leader were no doubt great, and the caravans would have come to be a significant part of the wealth of both Palmyra and of its leading citizens.

### *Finances*

We have already discussed how the caravan received much financial backing from the caravan leader, but there would of course still be considerable expenses for

each individual merchant. Although on some occasions, as we have seen, some of the caravan's expenses might be paid for by the leader or by some high official<sup>78</sup> in an act of public munificence designed to increase his prestige and influence, the very fact that such acts are commemorated would seem to indicate that normally the merchants themselves would have expected to bear these costs. Such costs might include customs tolls, the finance necessary to purchase the goods in Charax, transportation expenses, tolls paid to various local chieftains to ensure safe passage, and many other associated costs.

While there are no surviving inscriptions or papyri to indicate these costs as there are, for example, in Egypt, we might reasonably expect that the financial organisation of the trade in Palmyra was not dissimilar to that for the Egyptian Red Sea trade. Indeed, there is a possibility that this might be indicated by an inscription from a funerary tower in Palmyra which describes a financial arrangement in the terms of a maritime loan, and thus may indicate that this type of loan was made to merchants travelling to Charax.<sup>79</sup> It is likely that such loans would have been similar to that recorded in *P. Vindob.* G 40822 and studied in the chapter on Egypt, whereby the goods purchased were pledged as a security for the loan.<sup>80</sup> In all probability, this was the arrangement which would have been entered into by merchants with insufficient capital to purchase their goods outright, and would accordingly represent another area in which the wealthy magnates of the town could profit from the caravan trade.

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<sup>78</sup> As in the case of Septimius Worod, procurator and *argapet* of the city who is cited for bringing caravans back at his own expense (*Inv.* III. 7). See also *Inv.* III. 28 for another example of a caravan leader assuming costs normally borne by the caravan itself: on this occasion it is specified as being an expense of 300 "old gold *denarii*".

<sup>79</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Comptes d'un homme d'affaires dans une tour funéraire à Palmyre" *Semitica* L36 (1986), 87-99.

<sup>80</sup> See II. 3 above.

There also seems to have been another type of caravan, which may have been subject to a different kind of organisation and financing. An unpublished text from the temple of Allat refers to a caravan of “all the Palmyrenes”, raising the possibility that some caravans at least were organised and financed by the Palmyrene authorities.<sup>81</sup> While it would probably be excessive to make a whole case for state involvement in the trade based on this one inscription, the active encouragement of the trade and high profile the trade enjoyed in Palmyrene society, makes it at least possible that this is the case. Thus, there may well have been at least some state-sponsored caravans which made the trip to Spasinou Charax. However, the fact that only one caravan in our evidence is so described makes it likely that the vast majority of the caravans were private organisations formed exclusively for the purpose of one journey,<sup>82</sup> either at the initiative of a group of merchants or of a prospective *synodiarch* who gathered together a group of interested merchants. Therefore, while there may have been some direct state involvement in the trade, we should still assign the initiative for the commencement of the trade and the vast majority of the actual expeditions themselves to private individuals, specifically the landowning aristocracy of the city.

### *Conclusion*

From the available evidence, we have been able to build up a picture of the organisation of the caravan trade which passed through Palmyra. On the whole, it would seem better to reject the existence of a separate class of ‘caravan patron’,

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<sup>81</sup> M. Gawlikowski “Palmyre et l’Euphrate”, 65; M. Gawlikowski “Palmyra as a Trading Centre”, 32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

responsible for the financing and organisation of the expedition and its provision with sufficient beasts of burden for the journey. These duties for the most part can be assigned to the *synodiarch*, and the class of 'patron' can instead be thought of as comprising various individuals with no necessary link to the caravan who have helped it in some way and were honoured by the caravan for this reason. Military help, which will be considered in the next section, would also be suitably honoured when it was provided, but we do not need to associate this with any kind of 'caravan protector': rather, as we will see, this military protection seems to have been provided by the Palmyrene state itself.

Thus, despite the possible existence of some state-sponsored exceptions, the caravan trade itself was chiefly a privately initiated, organised and funded affair, in which groups of merchants would attach themselves to a wealthy Palmyrene aristocrat who could provide them with the means to make the journey, no doubt at some cost, and act, either personally or by a representative, as the caravan leader for the journey. However, this is not to say that the Palmyrene state, probably administered by these same nobles, did not appreciate the significance of this trade nor assist it in any way. On the contrary, we will see that the Palmyrenes were prepared to go to quite extraordinary steps to ensure that the trade upon which so much of their wealth depended could continue unmolested.

#### **IV.3 The Palmyrene Caravan Guards**

Palmyra, by virtue of its distinctive role and location, was never an ordinary city of the Empire. Perhaps no feature of Palmyra, however, is as unusual as the fact



that the city appears to have maintained its own army. There are several inscriptions in existence which appear to describe some sort of military organisation operating out of Palmyra,<sup>83</sup> which seems to have patrolled a wide area of the desert around the city, often at locations which are associated with the caravan trade.

The existence of such an organisation is, of course, somewhat problematical. Palmyra was, as has already been noted, a city of the Roman province of Syria, not an independent state. Accordingly, it is surprising to find such a city able to organise and deploy its own military forces, apparently with Roman acquiescence. Several explanations for this apparent anomaly have been put forward, some of which focus on a relationship between these forces and the 'caravan leaders' which were examined in the previous section. In this section, it is proposed to examine the evidence for the existence of Palmyrene military forces, and to see what can be learnt about them and their nature, and the role which they had to play in the caravan commerce between Palmyra and the Arabian Gulf.

### *The Inscriptional Evidence*

Several inscriptions attest to the existence of some sort of Palmyrene military force, showing a variety of military activities which were undertaken by these forces. Some of these have already been noted in the previous section dealing with the conduct of the caravan trade. Others, as will be seen, mention several areas of military activity, notably the maintenance of garrisons at strategic points on the caravan routes, and what appears to be the conferment of some sort of regular commands on

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<sup>83</sup> A list of these inscriptions and a short summary of each is provided in Appendix C.

certain individuals, possibly by the Council of the city. All these need to be examined closely, especially bearing in mind the possibility that all may not in fact be referring to the same military establishment.

The first type of apparent military involvement is found in the commemorative inscriptions which have already been studied. In these, the honorand is often mentioned as having “helped the caravan in every way” which is sometimes taken to mean that they offered the caravan military protection.<sup>84</sup> However, as has been seen, this phrase cannot necessarily always be taken to refer to military assistance. Certainly, some inscriptions do refer to a definite military organisation, but the caravan inscriptions which refer to generalised “help” do not necessarily have to be referring to this same organisation, if indeed they are speaking of military help at all. Some, as discussed in the previous section, may be referring to diplomatic and/or commercial assistance which the honorand offered the caravan; in other cases if military assistance was involved, this does not necessarily have to have come from an organised militia. As has been seen in the earlier chapter on the Red Sea trade in Egypt, caravans which passed over the desert roads between the Red Sea and the Nile valley employed private guards to protect them.<sup>85</sup> Given the high values of the goods being carried, it would be highly surprising if such guards were not also employed by Palmyrene caravans traversing the route between Charax and Palmyra. So, if it is indeed military help that is being referred to in the caravan inscriptions, we might

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<sup>84</sup> *Inv.* III. 29; X. 44, 47, 107, 111, 127. Most of these simply state that the honorand “helped the caravan in every way” without supplying any more specific information. For the interpretation of these inscriptions as referring to military protection see M.I. Rostovtzeff *Melanges Glotz* II, 805; E. Will “Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre”, 265-267; G. Bowersock “La Mésène (Maisan) antonine”, 159; J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 48; J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert.*, 31; J.F. Matthews “The Tax Law of Palmyra, 168.

<sup>85</sup> See II. 3 above.

possibly understand such help to have been from private guards, perhaps employed by the *synodiarch*, rather than from an organised militia.

It may therefore be profitable to make a distinction between caravan guards, who were probably employed by the *synodiarch*, and the “caravan police” or Palmyrene militia which, as shall be seen, appears to have been organised and controlled by the city itself. Rostovtzeff did not make this distinction; he envisaged an organised militia which was, by some sort of “trade agreement”, allowed to operate within Parthian territory.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, if the phrase “helped the caravan in every way” *does* refer to a militia then it must have been able to operate outside the Roman Empire and within areas of Parthian influence, as these inscriptions refer to help received on the journey between Charax and Palmyra, the bulk of which was well outside the area of direct Roman rule. Will, however, rightly recognised that any such militia would have been regarded by the Parthians as a Roman military organisation, and would never have been allowed on Parthian territory.<sup>87</sup> However, while Will recognised that any actual escort which the caravans received, especially outside Roman territory, was likely to have been from private guards, he did not distinguish between these and the other military organisations which are attested by the inscriptional evidence. Instead, he regarded all these references as speaking of private guards and/or extraordinary commands authorised by the city.<sup>88</sup> This is certainly true in reference to the inscriptions which imply some form of military protection or security provided by a *synodiarch* to a caravan. However, as will be seen, the evidence in other cases rather points to a more permanent arrangement, which appears

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<sup>86</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff *Melanges Glotz* II, 805-807.

<sup>87</sup> E. Will “Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre”, 267.

to have existed side-by-side with the private guards employed by the *synodiarchs*, much as Roman soldiers and private guards appear to have worked side-by-side in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.

One of the indications that the Palmyrene military was a permanent body is the evidence for the maintenance of garrisons at various strategic points, most of which appear to have been associated with the caravan routes. One such garrison appears to have been maintained on the island of 'Ana, or 'Anatha, in the Euphrates river. The earliest evidence for a Palmyrene military presence there is found in a Palmyrene inscription of A.D. 132 set up by a Nabataean horseman at Palmyra, who stated that he was "a horseman at Hirta and in the camp of 'Ana".<sup>89</sup> Similarly, a dedication from the temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra dated at some time after A.D. 188 was set up by cavalymen "of the detachment of 'Ana and Gamla",<sup>90</sup> while another inscription from Umm es-Selabikh on the desert road from Palmyra to Hit records an individual who was "*strategos* at 'Ana and Gamla" in A.D. 225.<sup>91</sup> As well as these garrisons at 'Ana and Gamla,<sup>92</sup> there is archaeological evidence of the presence of Palmyrene soldiers at the island of Bijan, 27km downstream from 'Ana, in the second and early third centuries: very possibly these soldiers might have been also under the command of the *strategos* of 'Ana and Gamla.<sup>93</sup> It is thus clear that a military presence was maintained by Palmyra in this area of the Euphrates, well downstream from direct Roman occupation before A.D. 164 and throughout the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 266. See also J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*, 31

<sup>89</sup> *CIS* II. 3973

<sup>90</sup> *Baalshamin* III. no. 51

<sup>91</sup> J. Cantineau "L'inscription de 'Umm es-Salâbih" *Syria* 14 (1933), 178-180.

<sup>92</sup> Gamla was identified by Cantineau with the modern Gmeyla, which is 4km downstream from 'Ana. See J. Cantineau "L'inscription de 'Umm es-Salâbih", 178-180.

<sup>93</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyre et l'Euphrate", 62.

second and third centuries A.D., marking this area as a very important one for Palmyra.<sup>94</sup> The significance of the Euphrates in the trade of Palmyra makes it probable that these military postings were dictated by commercial interest, and were intended to protect Palmyrene commerce travelling up and down the river.

Another important place which seems to have held Palmyrene troops is the city of Dura Europos, again on the Euphrates river. Three inscriptions were set up in the Mithraeum of the city by Palmyrene archers; two of them, dating from A.D. 169 and 170, name *strategoi* of the archers at Dura.<sup>95</sup> It has been claimed that the Palmyrene garrison was already in Dura while the city was still in Parthian hands,<sup>96</sup> and was perhaps allowed to operate there by some sort of trade agreement with the Parthian government. It is certainly true that there were Palmyrenes in the city prior to this time, as there was considerable evidence of a Palmyrene community uncovered in the excavation of the city.<sup>97</sup> These, however, would appear to have been merchants, whom we would not be surprised to find in Dura at this time given the city's position on the Euphrates route. The only evidence for a military presence prior to the capture of Dura by the Romans in A.D. 164, however, consists of the undated Palmyrene inscription noted above which the excavators dated to c. A.D. 150.<sup>98</sup> It is far more likely, as Gawlikowski points out, that these soldiers did not arrive until after the capture of Dura by the Romans in A.D. 164.<sup>99</sup> Again, we see the stationing of

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<sup>94</sup> D.L. Kennedy "Ana on the Euphrates in the Roman Period" *Iraq* 48 (1986), 104.

<sup>95</sup> *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 909: Dedication of the "B'nai Mitha, the archers"; *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 845, A.D. 169: Dedication of Ethpeni, *strategos* over the archers at Dura; *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 846, A.D. 171: Dedication of Zenobios, *strategos* of the archers.

<sup>96</sup> See e.g. F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 115.

<sup>97</sup> Most notable in this regard is the long series of Palmyrene inscriptions from the city, for which see C. du Mesnil du Buisson *Inventaire des inscriptions Palmyréniennes de Doura-Europos (32 avant J.-C. à 256 après J.-C.)* (Paris 1939).

<sup>98</sup> F.E. Brown in *Dura Preliminary Report* VII-VIII (New Haven 1939), 264, 279-281.

<sup>99</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyre et l'Euphrate", 61.

Palmyrene troops in a position of strategic value to Palmyra, particularly due to the use of the Euphrates by the commerce upon which the city's commerce appears to have depended.

That these units are not Roman seems to be clear from the lack of any Roman unit designations, the total absence of Roman names or titles among the officers or men cited in the inscriptions, and the persistent description of the commanders of these units as *strategoi* rather than any more conventional Roman term. Indeed, these *strategoi* are not the only ones found in the Palmyrene inscriptional corpus: the evidence in fact demonstrates that *strategos* was the title of an office at Palmyra which could have either military or non-military applications. In some cases it is clearly civil, being equivalent to the Latin *duumvir coloniae*. One such inscription, dating from A.D. 242/243, mentions one Julius Aurelius Zabdilah. While the Greek merely calls him *strategos*, the Palmyrene goes further and calls him a *strategos* of the colony:<sup>100</sup> it would seem clear that this inscription is referring to a civil office, that of one of the *duumviri* who were the chief magistrates of a Roman colony, which Palmyra had been since the early third century.

In other instances, however, the term *strategos* seems to be used to mean a military post. We have already noted the use of the term to mean the commander of a garrison at some point in the city's territory (or perhaps beyond it, as was certainly the case at Dura Europos<sup>101</sup>). There are also inscriptions from Palmyra which seem to indicate that the term *strategos* was also used as term for special military commands, or perhaps even regular ones. One of these, dated A.D. 198, refers to Aelius Boras,

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<sup>100</sup> *Inv.* III. 22. For a discussion of this inscription and other examples of *strategoi* as *duumviri coloniae* at Palmyra see H. Ingholt "Varia Tadmorea" in *Palmyre: Bilan et perspectives*, 124-126.

who appears to have held the title “*strategos* of the peace”. The missing fragments of the Greek text are supplied by the fragmentary parallel text in Palmyrene:

[προστάγματι βουλῆς καὶ δήμου  
Αἴλιον Βώραν Τίτου Αἰλίου Ὀγείλου  
τὸν στρατηγὸν τὸν ἐπὶ τῆς]  
εἰρήνης κατασταθέντα ὑπὸ τε  
Μανειλίου Φούσκου καὶ Οὐενιδίου  
Ῥούφου ὑπατικῶν καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς πα-  
τρίδος, καὶ πολλὴν σπουδὴν καὶ ἀνδρεί-  
αν ἐνδειξάμενον καὶ στρατηγήσαντα  
πλειστάκις . . .

By the decree of the Council and the People, (in honour of) Aelius Boras, son of Titus Aelius Ogeilu, *strategos* of the peace (Palm.: who established peace in the territories of the city), having been appointed by both Manilius Fuscus and Venidius Rufus, governors, and by his own country, and having displayed great enthusiasm and courage, and acting as *strategos* on many occasions ...<sup>102</sup>

This office appears to have been a military one, judging by the Palmyrene statement that he established peace in the city's territory, and by the statement that he did so bravely: hardly an adverb that one would normally use for the holding of civic office. It is also noteworthy that he was appointed both by the Roman governor of Coele Syria, and by the city of Palmyra itself. Presumably therefore, the city was obliged to seek the permission of the Roman authorities before it could employ its own troops in any significant operation.<sup>103</sup> This, of course, would hardly be surprising.

What, however, was the exact nature of this office of *strategos* of the peace?

The possible nature of such a post is made rather more clear by another inscription of the following year, A.D. 199:

προστάγματι βουλῆς καὶ δήμου.  
αἱ τέσσαρες φυλαὶ Ὀγῆλον Μακκαίου τοῦ Ὀγῆλου Ἀγεγοῦ  
τοῦ Σεουήρα δι' ἀρετὴν πᾶσαν καὶ διὰ τὰς συνεχεῖς τὰς  
κατὰ τῶν νομάδων στρατηγίας συναράμενον καὶ τοῖς ἐνπό-  
ροις καὶ ταῖς συνοδίαις αἰετὴν τὴν ἀσφάλειαν παρασχόντα ἐν πάσαις  
συνουδιαισιν . . .

<sup>101</sup> M. Gawlikowski “Le commerce de Palmyre sur terre et sur eau”, 165.

<sup>102</sup> SEG VII. 138

<sup>103</sup> J.F. Matthews “The Tax Law of Palmyra”, 168.

By the decree of the Council and the People. The four tribes (honour) Ogeilu son of Maqqai, son of Ogeilu Hagegu, son of Sewira, for all his virtue and courage and for continually raising commands against the nomads, and for always providing safety to the merchants and the caravans in all his caravan commands . . . <sup>104</sup>

This man appears to have been given some sort of command against the nomads; this time unquestionably a military post and very probably a similar or identical post to that held by Aelius Boras in the previous inscription. Some have stated that these posts were not regular, and were probably created by the city especially to meet a specific circumstance, presumably some serious difficulties with the nomads.<sup>105</sup> However, both honorands are specifically cited as having held their posts more than once; Ogeilu “continually” raised his expeditions against the nomads, while Aelius Boras held his commands under two successive governors of Syria. Thus, even if such commands as these were not regular, they would seem to have been frequently bestowed, at least in this particular time period. These two examples would appear to show that various individuals were appointed by the city to a military command which involved campaigning against the nomads who were threatening the territory of the city, and especially the caravan routes. We do not know if such posts were regular or not, but if they were not they were nonetheless quite common. They are more than likely related to the *strategoi* who were placed over a certain area or garrison, as we have already seen, and they certainly represent another piece of evidence for the existence of some sort of independent Palmyrene military establishment.

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<sup>104</sup> *Inv.* X. 44 = *SEG* VII. 139

<sup>105</sup> E. Will “Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre”, 265. Matthews (“The Tax Law of Palmyra”, 168), along with Will at this reference, consider that Ogeilu’s caravan commands in the latter inscription are the same as raising an expedition against the nomads, thus excluding a separate role or regularised command of “*strategos* against the nomads” or “*strategos* of the peace”. However, *Inv.*



It would appear quite probable that it was just such a command which was being exercised by So'adu son of Bolyada when he "saved" caravans which were under attack by nomads.<sup>106</sup> As has been noted earlier, these military exploits should be separated from his residence in Vologesias during which he erected a temple of the Augusti and helped the Palmyrene merchants there. In any case, trouble with nomads is not likely to have taken place within the settled area of the lower Euphrates valley in Mesene, and as has been noted it is most unlikely that the military forces of a Roman city would have been allowed in Parthian territory: such military action is far more likely to have taken place on the desert roads which connected Palmyra to the middle Euphrates, and thus within Palmyrene territory. We should probably distinguish two phases in So'adu's career: he was for some time resident in Vologesias, during which time he exercised some influence there and was able to use this to favour the Palmyrene merchants and caravans passing through that city. At another time, however, he appears to have commanded troops in Palmyrene territory which saved caravans in difficulty from nomad attack. It is quite possible that when he did this he was exercising some command like that of "*strategos* of the peace" or something similar.

We should be careful also to note a distinction between these units under direct Palmyrene command and the large numbers of Palmyrene auxiliary units in the Roman army. The presence of these troops in the Eastern Desert of Egypt has already been noted, as has the likelihood that these troops were chosen for that role

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X. 44 seems to separate the caravan commands and the expeditions against the nomads, indicating that these were two different positions.

<sup>106</sup> *Baalshamin* III. 45 (A.D. 132) and an unpublished inscription from the Allat temple at Palmyra (A.D. 144, see M. Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre", 32). See IV. 2 above.

because of their experience of the desert.<sup>107</sup> Such units, however, were also used in many other parts of the Empire, as well as in the vicinity of Palmyra itself. Palmyrene units and individual soldiers are attested by epigraphic evidence in Syria, Dacia, Numidia and even Britain, as well as Egypt.<sup>108</sup> Usually, these soldiers appear to have been either archers or *dromedarii*, especially in Egypt and Syria where their desert experience would have been useful.

One Palmyrene unit in the Roman army is particularly worthy of note, as it may help explain a link between these units and the Palmyrene caravan guards. The extensive records of the *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum* have been excavated at Dura Europos, testifying to the existence of this unit at Dura from A.D. 208 until 256, when the city was taken by the Persians.<sup>109</sup> It has previously been noted that a unit of Palmyrene archers was present at Dura in the years immediately following the conquest of the city by Lucius Verus in A.D. 164. It is altogether possible that the *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum* is in fact the same unit, except it has been 'regularised', given Roman officers, and incorporated into the Roman army as an auxiliary cohort.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, it may be possible that there was a general trend of 'regularising' the units of the Palmyrene caravan guards into Roman units, although this example is the closest we can come to a specific occurrence of this process.<sup>111</sup> Even so, we should note that after their incorporation into the Roman army (if that is indeed what took place) the priorities of these units were now Roman, not Palmyrene: they were there to defend

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<sup>107</sup> See II. 6 above.

<sup>108</sup> J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 41-43; F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 328, 333-334.

<sup>109</sup> J.F. Gilliam "The Roman Army in Dura" in C.B. Welles, R.O. Fink & J.F. Gilliam (eds.) *The Excavations at Dura Europos: Final Report V. 1, The Parchments and Papyri* (New Haven 1959), 24-27; D.L. Kennedy "The Cohors XX Palmyrenorum at Dura Europos" in E. Dabrowa (ed.) *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East* (Krakow 1994), 89-98.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

Dura from Persian attack, not to protect the caravan traffic. As the inscription from Umm es-Selabikh cited earlier tells us, the Palmyrenes were still carrying out that role by means of their own archers well into the third century.

Nonetheless, it is quite likely that there is a relationship between the units of the Palmyrene caravan guards and the Palmyrene auxiliary units in the Roman army. The experience of desert warfare gained by the units of Palmyrene archers may well have made them attractive prospects for recruitment as Roman auxiliaries: as well as individual soldiers, whole units may have been transferred from Palmyrene to Roman military authority. In either case, the presence of the long-distance trade at Palmyra will have had a significant impact on the experience in desert warfare gained by the Palmyrenes, and thus on their recruitment by the Roman authorities.

There is therefore solid evidence for the existence of an independent Palmyrene military, which had permanent garrisons, commanders appointed by the city who were called *strategoi* and who could be placed over garrisons in certain areas or who could be given a more general command against the nomads within the city's territory. Many of these troop postings appear to have been related to the caravan commerce, based on the preponderance of evidence in the Euphrates valley region, an area of prime importance to the Palmyrene caravan commerce but which was not garrisoned by the Roman army.

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<sup>111</sup> B. Isaac *The Limits of Empire*, 225.

## *The Nature of the Palmyrene Military Forces*

There are several different types of Palmyrene military operations which are attested in the inscriptional corpus. From these, we can detect a reasonable level of organisation in the Palmyrene military forces, and learn something of its nature. While the full organisation of these forces is not recoverable, there are nonetheless some conclusions which can be safely drawn.

The Palmyrene caravan guards seem to have been primarily archers, as these are the only type of troops ever mentioned, although the presence of Palmyrene *dromedarii* as Roman auxiliaries might indicate that these troops were to be found among the caravan guards as well. It is perhaps possible that the archers were of different types, that is, some may have been footsoldiers, while others may have been mounted on horses and/or camels. Some of these troops were placed in garrisons at important points on the trade route between Palmyra and the gulf within Palmyrene territory, notably in the Euphrates valley and possibly on the desert roads which reached the valley from Palmyra.

We know little about the command structure of these troops. They appear to have been commanded by officers called *strategoi*, which appears to have also been the title of a city magistracy. This may, therefore, indicate that the command of these troops was a civic office in Palmyra, held by the same type of people who comprised the city's ruling aristocracy. Some of these *strategoi* seem to have been appointed to command a certain area, such as the camps at 'Ana and Gamla, while others may have held a more general command, such as "*strategos* of the peace" or "*strategos* against the nomads". Whether these latter were regular commands or only created in time of

need is not certain, but if they were irregular they do seem to have been used fairly frequently.

The location of these troops indicates that their purpose was to protect the caravan traffic from the Gulf from bandit attacks: their priority does not seem to have been the physical defence of the city of Palmyra from an enemy such as the Persians; this was presumably the responsibility of the Roman auxiliary garrison in Palmyra itself.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the sole area of Palmyrene military activity seems to be to the East of the city, between Palmyra and the Euphrates valley. Regular Roman troops were stationed to the West of Palmyra, and the caravans could presumably have gained protection from them in this area.<sup>113</sup>

How then did such a military force come to exist in a provincial city of the Roman Empire? The first thing that should be noted is that the presence of a local militia such as the Palmyrene troops may not have been as exceptional as it might seem. There is considerable evidence for the existence of city and provincial militias in the Roman Empire which were distinct from the regular Roman army, and which could be called out by provincial governors (in the case of provincial militias) or by city officials (in the case of city militias). These militias are attested as being used for emergency defence, police duties and even on military construction tasks.<sup>114</sup> It would thus appear likely that the Palmyrene troops were some sort of city militia, under the

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<sup>112</sup> For this garrison see H. Seyrig "Textes relatifs à la garnison romaine de Palmyre" *Syria* 14 (1933), 152-168; M.P. Speidel "Numerus or Ala Vocontiorum at Palmyra?" in *Roman Army Studies* I (Amsterdam 1984), 167-169.

<sup>113</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre", 266.

<sup>114</sup> Josephus *BJ* II. 18. 9; V. 1. 6; Tacitus *Annales* XII. 49; XV. 3; Ovid *Ex Ponto* I. 2. 808; 8. 5-6; IV. 14. 28. See E. Birley "Local Militias in the Roman Empire" in *Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium 1972/1974* (Bonn 1976), 65-73; D. van Berchem "Le port de Seleucie de Pierie et l'infrastructure logistique des guerres parthiques", 47-87; B. Isaac *The Limits of Empire*, 326.

control of the officials of the city; this would then explain the apparent anomaly of a city of the Roman Empire maintaining its own forces.

Nonetheless, this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Palmyra seems to have had an unusually large and active militia. None of the other examples cited have anything near the volume of evidence to attest its existence as does the Palmyrene militia. The Palmyrene forces by contrast, as we have seen, appear to have been very active over a prolonged period of time and a wide expanse of territory. The reason for this must, of course, have been the peculiar demands of the caravan trade, as it has already been noted that the disposition of the Palmyrene troops as well as the surviving inscriptional evidence strongly suggest that these troops were primarily intended to guard the caravan routes. Thus it was because of the needs of the caravan commerce, and the necessity for a strong military force to protect the merchants from nomads and bandits, that the Palmyrene militia was allowed to grow so large and powerful.

A force such as this in the hands of a provincial city must inevitably have excited some unease amongst the Romans. It is certainly the case that a force such as the Palmyrene one, scattered in an assortment of encampments and caravanserais in order to oppose banditry, can have realistically provided little threat to the larger and more concentrated Roman forces. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the Romans would have tolerated such an arrangement without some supervisory capability for themselves. Indeed, we should note that Palmyra had an auxiliary garrison throughout at least the third century,<sup>115</sup> which would have enabled the governor of Syria to

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<sup>115</sup> M.P. Speidel "Numerus or Ala Vocontiorum", 169.

supervise the activities of the Palmyrene militia. In addition, as we have already seen, the inscription concerning Aelius Boras the *strategos* of the peace mentions the fact that he sought permission for his military activities from the Roman governor, an arrangement which was no doubt regular. By these means, then, it would seem that the Romans maintained a close watch on the activities of the Palmyrene militia and ensured that the Palmyrenes did not take any action which did not have the full approval of the Roman government.

Nonetheless, we are still left with the question of why the Romans allowed such a militia in any case. The reason would seem to be the same as the reason for the presence of Roman troops in the Eastern Desert of Egypt: the tax revenue which was paid by the merchants into the imperial coffers. One of the Palmyrene inscriptions refers to a collector of the 25% tax on incoming goods at Antioch,<sup>116</sup> so it would seem that goods coming into the Empire by the route through Palmyra paid the *τετάρτη* just as those coming through Egypt did. Accordingly, the income from this tax is likely to have been significant, and thought worth guarding just as the traffic through Egypt was guarded. For this reason, then, it would seem that the Romans permitted the Palmyrenes to operate a militia and to protect their caravan trade: for every caravan that successfully made the journey paid a significant sum into the imperial treasury. As with the trade in Egypt, there is no need or evidence to posit any more elaborate economic motive than this: the Romans, having in their possession a sizable source of income, were keen to ensure that they extracted the maximum possible

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<sup>116</sup> *Inv. X. 29*

income from it. If this meant allowing the Palmyrenes to operate their own militia, then so be it.

It has often been suggested that the Romans gave the job of the protection of the caravans over to the Palmyrenes because they were unwilling or unable to do it themselves, being unfamiliar with the desert terrain. However, the presence of substantial Roman forces in the Eastern Desert of Egypt who were performing precisely this job in a very similar (or perhaps even more arid) desert environment would appear to belie this. Rather, it would seem that the reason the Romans did not take on the job of protecting the caravans in this area was because there was someone else there willing to do the job: the Palmyrenes themselves. Thus, the expense of maintaining caravan guards was not, as in Egypt, borne by the Roman government: instead, the city officials of Palmyra bore it. This, rather than any Roman inability to conduct desert operations, would seem to provide the answer to the existence of the Palmyrene militia. Once again, it was dictated by the Roman desire to extract the maximum tax revenue possible out of the long-distance eastern trade.

#### *The Development of the Palmyrene Militia in the Second and Third Centuries.*

Throughout the time in which the Palmyrene military organisation appears to have operated, there seem to have been several changes, leading finally to a more substantial organisation which may have formed the backbone of the Palmyrene army in the later third century. In the early years of the Palmyrene commerce, we do not have any evidence for the existence of any military forces at Palmyra, although we of course may presume that the city maintained some forces of its own prior to its



incorporation in the Roman Empire. In addition, it would be most likely that the caravans which made the journey to Spasinou Charax in this period were also accompanied by irregular guards, but, as we have seen, such guards should be distinguished from the Palmyrene militia.

As was discussed earlier, the Palmyrene trade with the head of the Gulf appears to have been dramatically enhanced by the effects of Trajan's Parthian wars in the early second century A.D., which may have resulted in the kingdom of Mesene becoming a Roman client for a period.<sup>117</sup> It is from this period also that the first evidence for the existence of a Palmyrene militia comes, the inscription of the Nabataean cavalryman from the camp of 'Ana. The political status of 'Ana at this time is in some doubt: Dura Europos became Parthian again after a brief Roman occupation during Trajan's war, and it has generally been thought that 'Ana did not fall into Roman hands until the war of Lucius Verus in A.D. 164.<sup>118</sup> This has resulted in the belief that the Palmyrenes were permitted to place their troops at 'Ana under the same arrangement that is often postulated for Dura: that is, that the Palmyrene troops were permitted in Parthian territory due to their importance for the caravan trade.<sup>119</sup> However, as we have seen, it is most unlikely that there were any Palmyrene troops in Dura until that site was taken over by the Romans in 164, and it is accordingly unlikely that any agreement existed whereby the troops were permitted at 'Ana. As Will pointed out, any militia of a city of the Roman Empire would have been considered to be Roman troops by the Parthians, and accordingly would not

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<sup>117</sup> IV. 1 above.

<sup>118</sup> D.L. Kennedy "Ana on the Euphrates in the Roman Period", 103.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

have been permitted to enter Parthian territory.<sup>120</sup> The 'trade agreements' which are often put forward to explain the presence of Palmyrene troops on Parthian soil should accordingly be rejected.

Far more probable is Gawlikowski's suggestion that the Palmyrenes retained control of 'Ana and other posts in its immediate Area, such as Gamla and Bijan, after Trajan's Parthian expedition.<sup>121</sup> Thus, while the Parthians certainly reoccupied Dura after the Roman withdrawal from Mesopotamia in A.D. 117, this theory would suggest that 'Ana and its area remained Roman territory either by agreement or simply by the Parthians' failure to reoccupy it. The use of Palmyrene troops to occupy 'Ana at this time may thus be compared to the situation at Dura, whereby Palmyrene troops appear to have initially occupied the city in 164, only to be complemented by regular Roman troops later.<sup>122</sup> It would thus appear likely that the Palmyrene occupation of the sites in the Euphrates valley such as 'Ana, Gamla and Bijan may date from this period.

The presence of *strategoi* at these sites is not attested in the A.D. 132 inscription, but it is likely that these officers were present there, since in the instances where the term is attached to a place, such as the "*Strategos* of 'Ana and Gamla", it is most probable that it simply refers to the commander of that garrison. The Palmyrene troops at Dura, who appear to have been posted there soon after the Romans occupied the city in 164, seem to have been commanded by *strategoi*, and it appears that the term is the regular title of the commander of a garrison.

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<sup>120</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre", 267.

<sup>121</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyre et l'Euphrate", 60.

<sup>122</sup> J.F. Gilliam "The Roman Army in Dura", 24-27.

During and after the Severan period, however, the situation appears to have changed. In the inscriptions of A.D. 198 and 199 which were discussed above, the existence of *strategoi* with apparently more wide-ranging commissions has been noted. These may reflect the more unsettled circumstances occasioned by the wars between the Romans and the Parthians under Lucius Verus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla. As has been noted, the series of caravan inscriptions ceases in A.D. 161 and only resumes in A.D. 193, followed then by another gap until 211. These dates generally correspond with periods of warfare between Rome and Parthia. While the effects of these wars will be noted further on in this chapter,<sup>123</sup> the coincidence of these disturbances and the appearance of terms at Palmyra such as "*strategos* against the nomads" may indicate that more unsettled conditions existed and a greater degree of military activity against the nomads was required.

As has been noted, another inscription indicates that there was still a garrison and a *strategos* at 'Ana and Gamla in A.D. 225. The Palmyrene occupation of these sites does not appear to have lasted much longer than this, however. The attacks of the Sassanid Persian dynasty which replaced the Parthians in 226 soon drove the Palmyrene troops from their posts on the Euphrates river. Bijan does not have evidence of Palmyrene occupation after the reign of Alexander Severus,<sup>124</sup> while 'Ana appears (as 'Anatha) in the list of Roman posts along the Euphrates conquered by Shapur I in his first invasion of Syria which is usually dated to A.D. 256.<sup>125</sup> Dura, too, was destroyed by the Persians at this time and was never reoccupied. The evidence of the caravan inscriptions indicates that the commerce still continued after

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<sup>123</sup> IV. 5 below.

<sup>124</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Palmyre et l'Euphrate", 62.

these events, as there are inscriptions commemorating caravans from A.D. 257/258 and 260.<sup>126</sup> It would appear, however, that the activities of the Palmyrene militia in the Euphrates valley must have ceased by the middle of the third century A.D.

Nonetheless, it does not appear likely that the activities of the Palmyrene militia ceased altogether at this point. The ability of Palmyra to collect a substantial military force in connection with the activities of Septimius Odaenathus in the third quarter of the third century would rather indicate that this military capacity was continued and perhaps even expanded at this time, given the existence of strong Persian forces and the possibility of greater trouble from the nomads, perhaps egged on by the Persians. While the expansion of the Palmyrene military in these circumstances will be noted further in this chapter, it is enough now to note the uniqueness of this militia, especially in respect to its reliance on the caravan commerce for its existence. It would appear that it was the importance of the long-distance caravan commerce that caused the citizens of Palmyra to organise this protective force, and the importance of the commerce to imperial income in the form of taxes that caused the Romans to tolerate it. Thus, despite the existence of provincial and city militia at various other points throughout the empire, these factors show that the case of Palmyra is, in this respect as in many others, a strange and unique one, and furthermore it was to a large extent the caravan commerce which caused this uniqueness.

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<sup>125</sup> E. Honigmann & A. Maricq *Recherches sur les Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (Brussels 1953), 12, 146.

<sup>126</sup> *Inv.* III. 13 (A.D. 257/258), 7 (A.D. 260).

## *Conclusion*

There appears to be very strong evidence for the existence of an independent Palmyrene military organisation of some sort throughout the second and third centuries A.D. These units were clearly not Roman, and were commanded by *strategoi* who were appointees of the Palmyrene council. They appear to have ranged over a wide territory, especially the desert and the valley of the Euphrates to the east of Palmyra. Clearly this is a most unusual set of circumstances for a city of the Roman Empire. Even though the model of a city militia can be brought in as a parallel to these Palmyrene forces and show that they were not totally unique in the Empire, the fact remains that the range of this militia and its size appear to have been wholly unparalleled.

The reasons for this can be laid at the door of the caravan trade, and once again show how the caravan traffic had a profound and abiding effect upon Palmyrene society. It was to protect the caravan traffic that this militia existed, and it was to guarantee the safe passage of the caravans that the nomads needed to be suppressed. Rome permitted this no doubt because of the tax income which it derived from the trade. In Egypt, as we saw, the Romans were willing to spend a great deal of money and effort to ensure that this tax income flowed: how much more pleased they must have been when it became apparent that the Palmyrenes were willing to provide this protection themselves! Nonetheless, as will be seen, the Romans would have cause to regret this, for it was partially the existence of this militia which allowed Palmyra to chart its own political course later in the third century, when it appeared that Rome herself was unable to help.

#### **IV.4 The Effect of the Trade on Palmyrene Society**

Palmyra was for many reasons a highly distinctive city in the Empire, and one in which the eastern commerce played a far larger role than elsewhere. The existence of such institutions as a city militia designed mainly to protect the caravan routes shows clearly that the caravan trade figured highly in the life of the city. However, it is important to bear in mind that the caravan trade was not the only source of wealth for the city, as there is evidence of other sources. Accordingly, in this section it is intended to study what can be gleaned about the relative importance of the caravan trade at Palmyra compared to the other sources of income which the city possessed, and to determine what social effects the existence of the caravan trade might have had.

##### *The Relative Significance of the Caravan Trade at Palmyra*

Regrettably, as with so many other areas of the eastern long-distance trade, there is no evidence which would enable us to quantify the volume of the eastern trade passing through Palmyra. Nonetheless, the relative significance which the trade appears to have had in the city, compared to other sources of income, does give some, albeit subjective, impression of the importance of the trade at Palmyra and the extent to which it affected the social and political makeup of Palmyrene society.

The caravan trade was not the only source of income which Palmyra had. It has already been noted that there is evidence for substantial herding activities as well as agricultural development in the area to the North-West of Palmyra: indeed, these

herding establishments especially were seen to have had a significant role in the development of the caravan commerce.<sup>127</sup> As well as contributing to the rise of the caravan commerce, these farming activities would also have made their own direct contribution to the economic life of the city, showing clearly that, however prominent the caravan trade, it was by no means the only source of income exploited by the Palmyrenes.

This fact is reflected in the so-called *Portoria Palmyrenorum*, or the Tariff of Palmyra. This document, an inscription from the agora in Palmyra, gives the dues which were to be paid on various items of merchandise in the market at Palmyra. The document is therefore not directly related to the transit caravan trade, but deals instead with goods which were consumed at Palmyra itself.<sup>128</sup> The information it reveals shows that Palmyra had a reasonable market for the produce of the desert and the pastoral region around the city, including such goods as wheat, wine, animal skins and other staples. While the produce of the territory of Palmyra itself was not taxed, that which was brought in from outside the city's territory was.<sup>129</sup> It is indeed interesting that some goods clearly were imported from outside the city's territory, for one effect of the city's apparent commercial vocation would have been a substantial non-productive population, which would then have necessitated food imports.<sup>130</sup> Thus, the presence of the caravan trade in the city might well have contributed to the market for the staple items listed in the tariff. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>127</sup> IV. 1 & 2 above.

<sup>128</sup> For the text of the Tariff see *CIS* II. 3913. Comprehensive discussions of this text are found in I. Shifman *Palmirskij Poshlinnyj Tarif* (Moscow 1980); J. Teixidor *Un port romain du désert*; J.F. Matthews "The Tax Law of Palmyra".

<sup>129</sup> J.F. Matthews "The Tax Law of Palmyra", 172-173.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

existence of the tariff makes it clear that Palmyra enjoyed other sources of income beside the caravan commerce, as indeed we might expect.

Despite the presence of such alternative sources of income it is nonetheless clear that none of them enjoyed the kind of public significance and respect as did the caravan trade. The inscription which relates the Palmyrene tariff was set up in the agora of the city, in a place where much of the dealing in the merchandise on the tariff would have taken place. This was in a public area, but nonetheless also an area which was associated with the commerce described in the inscription. The commemorative caravan inscriptions, however, have clearly been placed in positions of great prominence so that the greatest number of people could see the statues and their inscriptions, and admire the deeds of the benefactors of the caravans. Some, indeed, are placed in the agora like the tariff inscription, but here the caravan trade has little to do with the market of Palmyra itself: as far as we know, the caravans would simply have passed through the city. The selection of the agora for these inscriptions would seem to have been chiefly dictated by the desire to have them prominently located in a public place. This is even more the case with those inscriptions which are from the great colonnade in the centre of the city, and from the various temples of the city. In each case, the site has clearly been chosen to give maximum prominence to the dedicand.

The special prominence given to those who had helped the caravans is clearly a reflection of the great significance the trade had at Palmyra. No other place in the Roman East ever honoured merchants and those who helped them so prominently: evidently the preservation of the caravan traffic was felt to have been extremely



important for the future prosperity of the city. The significance of the trade in the city's life is further seen in the number of the caravan inscriptions which were voted by the "council and people of the Palmyrenes" instead of by private individuals.<sup>131</sup> While the other inscriptions which were dedicated by individuals or by the members of a caravan might be explained away as simply expressions of private gratitude,<sup>132</sup> those which were set up by order of the city authorities are a clear demonstration of the prominence that the caravan traffic held in the eyes of the Palmyrene authorities. It is evident that the authorities of the city thought the protection and encouragement of the caravans was a matter of great importance to the continuing welfare of the city, otherwise they would never have given such high honours and prominence to the men who protected and promoted the trade.

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<sup>131</sup> Caravan inscriptions dedicated by the Council and/or People include: *Inv.* X. 127 (A.D. 86); X. 114 (A.D. 138); Milik *Dédicaces* 12-14 (A.D. 145/146); *Inv.* X. 44 (A.D. 199); III. 13 (A.D. 257/258); IX. 30 (early 3rd. century A.D.); III. 7 (A.D. 266).

<sup>132</sup> Though not very convincingly: they are still in very public and prominent places, indicating the importance of the trade to the city.



Illustration IV. 1: The Grand Collonnade, Palmyra. Note the plinths here and in the agora (below), which held statues of the caravan leaders and other honoured citizens. The honorific inscriptions were generally written immediately beneath the plinths.



Illustration IV. 2: The Agora, Palmyra.

This special significance of the caravan trade to the city, and especially the great wealth that it brought, may also perhaps account for some of the uniquely independent nature which we see manifested at Palmyra. We have already seen the way in which Palmyra maintained its own forces with Roman permission, but there are other indications also that Palmyra held an unusual status within the Empire. One of the most striking things is the self-conscious "easternness" of the city, compared to the almost complete adoption of Hellenism by other cities of the Roman East. The religious activities of the Palmyrenes and their public inscriptions all present a curious mix of Hellenistic and Palmyrene precedents: the inscriptions in particular are usually Greek and Palmyrene bilinguals; the use of a local language in inscriptions in this way is unparalleled in Roman Syria.<sup>133</sup>

Whether or not this can be attributed to influences brought along the trade routes is problematical. There has been a tendency to label the style of art found at Palmyra as "Parthian" and attribute its presence at Palmyra to contact with the Parthian realm, no doubt through the avenue of the caravan trade.<sup>134</sup> However, as Millar has pointed out, this style of art is found over a substantial area of Mesopotamia and the Hauran, and is difficult to ascribe to any particular point of origin; it is therefore no proof of the importance of the caravan trade in shaping Palmyrene culture.<sup>135</sup> We might, however, raise the possibility that this apparent independence and distinctiveness may have arisen from the wealth and power generated by the caravan trade, allowing the Palmyrenes to maintain their

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<sup>133</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 321-330. For Palmyrene religious practices see M. Gawlikowski "Les dieux de Palmyre" *ANRW* II. 18. 4 (1990), 2605-2658.

<sup>134</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff "Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art" *YCS* 5 (1935), 157-304.

<sup>135</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 329.

selfconscious “easterness” more than other cities which were more directly dependent upon Rome. This is, of course, entirely hypothetical, and it may simply be that the isolation of the city from Roman centres and its contact with other Syrian and Mesopotamian cities was the reason this phenomenon arose. If indeed it was the case that the use of Aramaic was an index of Palmyrene independence, it is unusual that the Romans do not appear to have stopped the use of Palmyrene in public inscriptions after the suppression of the Palmyrene revolt in A.D. 272.<sup>136</sup> Perhaps the best that can be said in this regard is that there may have been a relationship between the caravan trade and the retention of Palmyrene in the public inscriptions of the city.

Nonetheless, there is still clear evidence that the caravan trade had a profound effect on the political and social life of Palmyra. The prominence afforded to the trade by the city, chiefly in the form of honorific inscriptions and public recognition of caravan benefactors, shows that this trade was of great significance to the people of Palmyra. Accordingly, we might well be able to determine from the body of evidence available what some of the effects of this significance might have been.

### *The Place of the Caravan Traders in Palmyrene Society*

This notable significance of the caravan trade at Palmyra may also tell us something of the role the trade’s practitioners had in Palmyrene society. Elsewhere in the Roman world, as has already been noted, merchants, although they could become wealthy indeed, were excluded from the highest orders of society.<sup>137</sup> In Palmyra,

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 335-336. See K. As’ad & M. Gawlikowski “New Honorific Inscriptions in the Great Colonnade of Palmyra” *AAAS* 37 (1987), 164, nos. 7-8.

<sup>137</sup> See II. 3 above.



however this does not appear to have been the case. It has already been noted that the commemorative inscriptions and statues which were put up both by and for caravan leaders and others involved in the commerce occupied positions of extraordinary prominence in the centre of the city. This would appear to reflect a high degree of civic pride in the achievements of these people, as well as a high level of prominence of these individuals.

Indeed, it would seem that caravan leaders could be members of the city's elite, and that, far from trying to hide their involvement in trade they were very keen, as the commemorative inscriptions attest, to have their involvement with the caravan trade well known and publicised. This tendency seems to have reached to the very highest levels of the Palmyrene elite. One particularly important individual who also appears to have had a significant involvement in the caravan trade was one Septimius Worod. One of the six surviving inscriptions which were erected in his honour sets out the offices he held in the city as well as his involvement with the caravan commerce:

ἡ βουλὴ καὶ ὁ δῆμος  
 Σεπτίμι[ιον Οὐρωδην] τὸν κρά-  
 τιστον ἐ[πίτροπον] Σεβαστοῦ  
 δουκην[άροιν, δι]κεοδότην  
 τῆς μητ[ροκολων]είας καὶ ἀ-  
 νακομίσαν[τα τ]ὰς συνοδίας  
 ἐξ ἰδίων καὶ μαρτυρηθέντα  
 ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχεμπόρων καὶ  
 λαμπρῶς στρατηγήσαντα καὶ  
 ἀγορανομήσαντα τῆς αὐτῆς  
 μητροκολωνείας καὶ πλείστα  
 οἰκοθεν ἀναλώσαντα καὶ ἀρέσαν-  
 τα τῇ τε αὐτῇ βουλῇ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ  
 καὶ νυνεὶ λαμπρῶς συμποσίαρ-  
 χον τῶν το[ῦ θεοῦ] Διὸς Βήλου ἱε-  
 ρέων, ἀ[γνείας καὶ] τειμῆς ἔνε-  
 κεν, ἔτ[ους ζοφ' μηνεὶ] Ξανδικῶ.

The Council and the People to Septimius Worod, the eminent *procurator duценarius* of Augustus, *iuridicus* of the *metrocolonia* who has brought back caravans at his own expense and been given testimony by the chief merchants, who has brilliantly acted as *strategos* and *agoranomos* of the same *metrocolonia* and spent greatly of his own resources and been pleasing to the Council and the People, and who now brilliantly acts as *symposiarch* of the priests of the god Zeus Bel, as evidence of his integrity and honour, in the year 577, in the month Xandikos (A.D. 266).<sup>138</sup>

Septimius Worod was clearly an extremely important individual: he was at the very top (with the exception only of Odaenathus and his family at this particular time in Palmyrene history) of the Palmyrene political ladder. In other inscriptions he also is called by the title *argapet*, a Persian term which is to be translated as “governor of the city”.<sup>139</sup> What is interesting from the viewpoint of this study is that his involvement in the caravan commerce is thought worthy of inclusion in such an inscription. This inscription has not been set up to honour his involvement with only one particular caravan: instead, it is intended to honour *all* the services which Septimius Worod had rendered to the city, but the fact that he had helped the caravans is thought worthy of inclusion in what is in effect the man’s *cursus honorum*. Roman equestrians and even Senators may have been involved in the eastern commerce and may even have drawn great profit from it, but none of them would have even dreamed of including such a reference in a commemorative inscription. Not so at Palmyra: there, participation in the caravan commerce, especially benefactions to the caravans, was thought a matter of pride and great civic honour.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *Inv.* III. 7

<sup>139</sup> *Inv.* III. 6, 8, 9. For the translation of *argapet* see J. Cantineau’s commentary to these inscriptions in the *Inventaire*.

<sup>140</sup> It must be admitted that this is the only known instance of a person involved in the caravan commerce at Palmyra holding a high civic post in the city except the *strategeia* held by Aelius Boras and Ogeilu mentioned above, which were also city appointments, although of a military nature (see IV.

Moreover, Septimius Worod was not the only individual at Palmyra who sought honour by recognition of his services to the caravan trade. The case of Julius Aurelius Salamallat, a caravan leader who brought back a caravan at his own expense, has already been noted; similarly, another inscription commemorates one Taimarsu ben Taime and his sons Iaddai and Zabdibol for saving a caravan an expense of 300 gold *denarii*.<sup>141</sup> It is clear that these people are engaging in the practice of euergetism which is common in the Hellenistic and Roman world:<sup>142</sup> they are paying for public benefits out of their own pockets to gain influence and prestige. In the context of this study, however, two things are worthy of note: first, that caravan leaders were the type of people who would be seeking such public honour and recognition, and obviously could aspire to an important role in the political life of the city. Second, that one way in which their public-spirited munificence could be displayed was by the provision of services to caravans. Clearly, the caravan trade was of great significance at Palmyra, and the caravan leaders were of a class of people who could rightly describe themselves as Palmyra's elite. Moreover, they wore their involvement with the caravan commerce with pride, and clearly regarded the caravan trade as a suitable area in which to display their talents and to build their prestige.

This is not to say, of course, that such people reached the elite *because* of their involvement in the caravan trade, or that any merchant involved in the trade

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3 above). Nonetheless, the career of Septimius Worod indicates that involvement in the caravan commerce was no impediment to political advancement at Palmyra. The post of *strategos* mentioned in *Inv.* III. 7 is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *duumvir coloniae*, the highest civic post in a *colonia*. Similarly the post of *argapet*, although unique to Palmyra among the cities of the Roman Empire, would seem to be an exalted one, perhaps indicating the governor of the city under the general oversight of Odaenathus (see IV. 5 below). The *cursus honorum* at Palmyra in these years is very difficult to reconstruct, particularly as there seem to have been numerous local posts such as *argapet* existing alongside the regular Roman posts common to all *coloniae*. For the known political structure of Palmyra see F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 324-327.

<sup>141</sup> *Inv.* III. 28

could aspire to become a member of this elite. On the contrary, the bulk of the merchants involved in the commerce no doubt made a tidy profit, but are highly unlikely to have ever been able to reach the ranks of their city's political elite. This possibility, however, does appear to have been attainable for the class from which the *synodiarchs* came. These individuals seem to have come from a class of wealthy herding magnates who owned large tracts of land to the North-West of the city: by their access to capital, supplies and pack animals, and their familiarity and experience with the desert they were able to create the trade route which brought so much wealth to Palmyra.<sup>143</sup> Despite the non-mercantile origin of their power and wealth, the inscriptions show that they clearly recognised the continuing prosperity both of themselves and of their city depended upon the caravan trade. Thus, we see that the caravan trade enjoyed great prominence and prestige at Palmyra, while the leading practitioners of that trade, the *synodiarchs*, were (or at least could be) members of the political elite of the city. Not only was participation in the caravan trade not an impediment to high civic office at Palmyra, it would seem that it could even be of assistance to one wishing to climb the Palmyrene political ladder.

### *Palmyra's Equestrian Officers*

Another way in which the caravan traffic may have affected Palmyrene society is in the large number of individuals from the city who seem to have held equestrian rank, especially in the third century. In addition to the inscriptions from

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<sup>142</sup> E. Will "Marchands et chefs de caravanes a Palmyre", 270.



the Palmyrene corpus which mention members of the *ordo equester*, there are also several inscriptions from elsewhere in the empire which mention equestrian military officers who claim Palmyra as their origin.<sup>144</sup> Most of these were serving with the Palmyrene auxiliary units mentioned earlier, but some were attached to other eastern units which do not appear to have been Palmyrene in origin.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, there is quite a disproportionately large number of equestrian officers coming from Palmyra, particularly from the third century, when compared to other towns and provinces of the Roman East. For example, there are nine attested equestrian military officers from Palmyra operating with Roman auxiliary units in the first three centuries A.D., compared to two each from Antioch, Heliopolis and Emesa, and one each from Tyre, Samosata and Seleucia.<sup>146</sup>

It could be suggested that this came about as a 'reward' to Palmyra for its maintenance of the caravan routes through the desert. However, it would seem more likely that the reason this situation came about was rather more indirect, although still related to the caravan traffic. The large number of Palmyrene auxiliary units has already been noted, together with the likely association of these units with the Palmyrene caravan guards and their experience with the desert environment. It is likely that the large number of military equestrian appointments arose for the same reasons, together with the wealth which was characteristic of the city's economic prosperity in the second and third centuries. Indeed, Devijver notes that the economic

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<sup>143</sup> Such a link can be positively demonstrated in the case of the family of M. Ulpius Iarhai, which is attested in inscriptional evidence as being involved both in herding activities in the territory of Palmyra and in mercantile activities in Spasinou Charax. See IV. 2 above.

<sup>144</sup> H. Devijver "Equestrian Officers from the East" in P. Freeman & D. Kennedy (eds.) *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, 179-183.

<sup>145</sup> E.g. *PME* A7, A8; C165; G29bis; Inc.71.

<sup>146</sup> H. Devijver "Equestrian Officers from the East", 183.

flowering of the city in that period would have provided a fertile breeding-ground for the equestrian order.<sup>147</sup> In addition, the need for officers experienced with desert warfare and familiar with eastern types of units such as *dromedarii* and horse archers would have made Palmyrene officers, who had perhaps already gained such experience as a part of Palmyra's own armed forces, ideal for such service in the Roman army.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, the two factors that seem to have produced this large number of equestrian officers from Palmyra can be traced to the caravan trade. The wealth which would have qualified many Palmyrenes for membership in the *ordo equester* was no doubt at least partly generated by the caravan trade; in addition, as has already been noted, the experience in desert warfare which the Palmyrenes gained in their protection of the caravans and the caravan routes gave them qualities which they would find useful in a Roman military career. In this way the caravan trade can be seen to have had another significant effect upon Palmyrene society, although not as direct as those already outlined. Nonetheless, if it had not been for the caravan trade passing through Palmyra and the wealth it generated then it is most unlikely that as many Palmyrenes as did would have been able to make successful careers for themselves in the Roman army.

### *Conclusion*

There seem to have been a number of ways, both direct and indirect, by which the caravan commerce affected the political and social makeup of Palmyrene society. Despite the fact that there are no statistics by which we might quantify these effects,

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 205.

it is nonetheless clear from much of the related evidence that the caravan commerce held a position of great significance in Palmyrene society: indeed, enough of an influence that we might with justification call Palmyra a “caravan city”.

Although the city clearly did derive some of its income from herding activities, and indeed it was by this means that the leading aristocrats of the city gained their wealth, the prominence given to the caravan trade in the commemorative inscriptions and honours voted by the city, as well as the great lengths to which the city authorities were prepared to go in the interests of the trade, shows clearly that the caravan trade came to be of prime importance in the economic life of the city. Nowhere else in the Roman East do we see the trade assuming such importance, and its practitioners being held in such high esteem. Thus, although we cannot quantify the volume of trade which passed through Palmyra, we can nonetheless see that the trade was considered to be of the first importance in the creation of the prosperity of the city: having no better viewpoint ourselves, it would seem prudent to accept the Palmyrenes’ opinion of the importance of the caravan trade and recognise that Palmyra, even more than other areas where the trade was active, was indeed an exception to the prevailing economic model of agrarian subsistence in the remainder of the Empire.<sup>149</sup> In the sense that a significant proportion of the city’s wealth and influence is directly attributable to the caravan trade, we can indeed call Palmyra a “caravan city”.

This is also reflected in the honours given to those who protected and organised the caravans. Involvement with the caravans was recorded with pride by

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 184; B. Isaac *The Limits of Empire*, 225.

<sup>149</sup> For models of the Roman economy in general see I. 3 above.

members of the very highest strata of Palmyrene society, and the protection and financing of caravans seems to have been considered a fit arena for euergetism, in which the rich and influential members of society might display their wealth and munificence and enhance their prestige. The fact that the caravans were considered a suitable place to display euergetism again demonstrates the high esteem in which the caravan trade was held at Palmyra. The esteem in which this trading, and indeed the traders themselves, were held is in sharp contrast to the attitude which could be found elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Thus, we can see the deep influence which the caravan trade had upon Palmyrene society.

Another, less direct avenue of influence was in the large number of equestrian officers who came from Palmyra, especially after the city peaked in wealth and power in the second century A.D. While these appointments did not arise directly from the caravan trade, the trade nonetheless created two important conditions which made these appointments possible. Firstly, the wealth generated by the trade would have qualified more people for equestrian rank. Secondly, the Palmyrenes were experienced in desert conditions which would have made them more useful to the Romans in a military capacity, as is reflected in the large number of Palmyrene auxiliary units which were incorporated into the Roman army. Much of this military experience would have come from the military formations which the Palmyrenes themselves raised in their attempts to protect their caravan traffic. In this way, the caravan traffic can be seen to have indirectly contributed to the large number of equestrian officers who came from Palmyra.

It is clear, therefore, that the caravan traffic had several profound effects upon the makeup of Palmyrene society and the attitudes of its citizens. Indeed, throughout the course of this study, no other place has been studied where these effects are more obvious or more profound. It is true to say that Palmyra would have been, without its caravan traffic, a very different, and no doubt much smaller and less significant place.

#### **IV.5 Palmyra in the Third Century: Crisis, Revolt and Aftermath**

After the civil wars which brought Septimius Severus to the imperial throne, the East began to loom large in the affairs of the Roman Empire. Severus' reign brought about a new series of wars with Parthia, which could not but have affected Palmyra's trade. These effects were further compounded by the political crisis which racked the Empire in the third century. These circumstances, combined with the rise of Persia as a rival power to Rome that was far more formidable than the Parthians had ever been, combined to make the third century a time of far greater uncertainty and instability for Palmyra and its trade than the previous century had been.

It is well known that Palmyra rebelled against Rome in the years leading up to the destruction of the city in A.D. 272 and 273. The reasons for this rebellion, or even its nature, are rather more clouded, however. It should be noted that the crisis in the caravan traffic which, as has been seen, affected the commerce in Egypt and Arabia, also made its presence felt in Syria, and the concurrence of this crisis with the revolt of Palmyra perhaps may not be completely coincidental.

### *Palmyrene Commerce in the Third Century*

The halt in caravan traffic which was occasioned by the wars of Lucius Verus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla against Parthia has already been noted. It is clear that, when the Romans wished to undertake a war of aggression, the needs of such things as the caravan trade were of little moment. Given the importance of the traffic to Palmyra, these cessations of the commerce cannot but have had an adverse affect upon the economy of the city, and thus may be regarded as possible explanations for Palmyrene actions of the later third century. Of course, such disturbances as we see affecting Palmyra through this period may have adversely influenced other areas of the city's interests beside the caravan trade, and we should be careful before we ascribe to the caravan trade actions which may be equally well explained by other motives. Nonetheless, in a city as dependent on the long-distance trade as Palmyra seems to have been, the caravan trade was probably a significant consideration in the determination of policy.

While the wars of the later second and early third centuries do appear to have adversely affected Palmyra's trade, this situation only appears to have become worse in the course of the third century. In A.D. 224 the Persian Ardashir overthrew the last Parthian king, Artabanus, and established the Sassanid monarchy which would prove to be a much more vigorous opponent of Rome than the Parthians had been.<sup>150</sup> Almost immediately the actions of Ardashir and his successors began to affect the Roman East, as well as the eastern caravan trade. The great increase in the number of military campaigns, as well as the frequent invasion of Roman territory during the

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<sup>150</sup> Herodian VI. 2. 6-7

third century, would certainly have had extremely disruptive effects on the eastern commerce.

It is noteworthy that after this time the Palmyrene caravan inscriptions cease to mention expeditions to Spasinou Charax. While caravans travelling as far as Vologesias are still attested,<sup>151</sup> it would seem that transit to Charax may not have been possible. Ardashir seems to have taken possession of Mesene in A.D. 226,<sup>152</sup> which may have curtailed the Palmyrene commerce there. Some traffic must have continued through Charax, however, as the caravans reaching Vologesias would presumably pick up goods that had been brought there from Charax. The influence of Palmyrenes there, however, is likely to have been substantially reduced or eliminated altogether.

Worse still was to follow. In the middle of the third century, Ardashir's successor Shapur I launched a series of invasions of Roman territory, in the course of which he temporarily occupied Antioch and sacked several cities. These invasions culminated in the defeat and capture of the Emperor Valerian by Shapur in A.D. 260.<sup>153</sup> Such violent irruptions must inevitably have caused great disruption to the Palmyrene commerce, not to mention grave concern about the future of the city itself. In the course of these invasions, Dura Europos was captured by the Persians and destroyed, and the Palmyrene garrisons further down the Euphrates, such as 'Ana, were presumably lost at the same time or earlier.<sup>154</sup> The political situation in which Palmyra found itself in the middle of the third century would therefore have been quite concerning: militarily and commercially the situation of Palmyra must have

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<sup>151</sup> *Inv.* III. 21

<sup>152</sup> J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski *Palmyre*, 53.

<sup>153</sup> For the various sources describing Shapur's invasions see M.H. Dodgeon & S.N.C. Lieu *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)* (London 1991), 34-67.

seemed considerably more parlous than before. In addition, the apparent inability of the Roman authorities to help the East against these invasions and their consequent disruption must have caused concern, and increased the perception that if Palmyra was to survive, it must take action on its own account.

The increase in military activity which no doubt had a disruptive effect upon the caravan traffic may have also been accompanied by a rise in the hostile activities of nomads. This is possibly reflected in the increasing activities of the Palmyrene militia in this period, as has already been noted. The appearance of the terms “*strategos* against the nomads” and “*strategos* of the peace” in A.D. 198 and 199 may indicate some rise in difficulties with the nomads, as may the appearance of the title *Ras Tadmor* in the middle of the third century.<sup>155</sup> Although this evidence is certainly far from conclusive, it may indicate that the nomads were threatening and disrupting the caravan traffic rather more frequently during the third century.

There is indeed some evidence which may throw light on the relations between Palmyra and the nomads at this time, and may indicate rising tensions in these relations during the third century.<sup>156</sup> The Arab historian al-Tabari mentions the existence of a tribal coalition called the Tanukh in his account of the destruction of Palmyra. Unfortunately the Arab accounts of Palmyra’s fall are of limited historical value, as they present the destruction of Palmyra as exclusively a war between the

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<sup>154</sup> The name “Anatha” appears in the list of places conquered by Shapur in his invasion of 256. See E. Honigmann & A. Maricq *Recherches sur les Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, 12, 146.

<sup>155</sup> H. Ingholt (“Varia Tadmorea”, 123) suggests that this title may refer to the commander of the Palmyrene militia. It is only ever held by members of the family of Odaenathus. For a discussion of this office see Appendix D.

<sup>156</sup> G.W. Bowersock *Roman Arabia*, 132-137.



Tanukh and Palmyra, without the involvement of the Romans.<sup>157</sup> Nonetheless, the existence of the Tanukh and their King Jadhima, also mentioned by al-Tabari, has been confirmed by the discovery of an inscription at Umm al-Jimal commemorating a Nabataean tutor of Jadhima,<sup>158</sup> and another inscription from Namara which names Imru'l-qais, the son of Jadhima's nephew.<sup>159</sup> Thus, while the historical details of the struggle may have been lost in the Arab accounts, the enmity between Palmyra and the Tanukh to which they refer is likely to be based on fact. There thus is evidence which may well indicate the existence of a powerful coalition of nomadic tribes which was an enemy of Palmyra in the later third century A.D.

The increasing disruption of the Palmyrene trade route may also be reflected in the rise in activity on alternative trade routes in Egypt and Arabia. It has already been noted that in the Severan period there seems to have been a rise in trading activity in the Egyptian Red Sea trade, as well as along the Wadi Sirhan in Arabia.<sup>160</sup> Given the increase in difficulties on the Palmyrene trading route at this time, it may well have been that merchants chose to send their wares through these alternate routes rather than risk the Euphrates route which was so frequently blocked by war. This trend may also be reflected by the appearance of Palmyrene merchants in Egypt at this time, as was discussed in the chapter on the Egyptian Red Sea trade. It is possible that these merchants may have left Palmyra, which may have been losing trade, in order to move to Egypt, where the commerce in the Severan period appears to have been quite healthy. It is thus quite possible that the disruption of the caravan trade

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<sup>157</sup> Al-Tabari 745-761. In this account, Jadhima is killed by al-Zabba (i.e. Zenobia) who is then defeated by 'Amr ibn 'Adi, the nephew of Jadhima, and kills herself.

<sup>158</sup> *PAES* IV. A, no. 41

through Palmyra at this time may have led to the loss of traffic to other routes between India and the West.

The economic difficulties which would no doubt have come about due to this loss of trade would no doubt have been worsened still more by the general economic crisis of the middle and later third century A.D. It has already been seen that the trade in Egypt and in Arabia seems to have suffered a considerable downturn at this time, and furthermore that this downturn can be confidently ascribed to the galloping inflation and general economic crisis which affected the whole Roman world during this period. Palmyra too is not likely to have escaped the adverse effects of this downturn: in all probability the Palmyrenes found that the markets for their wares were not as strong as they had been.

In such circumstances, the apparent decision of Palmyra's rulers to take an active hand in their own destiny is perhaps unsurprising. This combination of factors which appears to have affected Palmyra's trade in the third century would have made the rulers of the city far more concerned about their future than perhaps they had been in the previous century, and possibly more likely to take active steps to redress the situation should the opportunity present itself. Of course, in the circumstances of such events as the Persian invasions there may have been deeper concerns still: with the apparent inability of the Romans to protect the East, the Palmyrenes may well have felt that their very survival lay in their own hands. Indeed, in a city such as Palmyra where trade appears to have held a very prominent place in society, the subjects of survival and continuing commercial prosperity may have been regarded as

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<sup>159</sup> R. Dussaud & F. Macler "Rapport sur une mission scientifique dans les régions désertiques de la Syrie moyenne" *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires* 10 (1902), 409-421.

closely related if not identical. In any case, it is at the very ebb of Roman fortunes in the East, the capture of the Emperor Valerian by Shapur I at Edessa in A.D. 260, that we indeed do see the Palmyrenes apparently take matters into their own hands, and become an independent military power in the East.

### *The Rise of Palmyra as an Independent Power*

The appearance of Palmyra as an independent military power is inextricably linked to the rise of Septimius Odaenathus, whose titles and career are dealt with in detail elsewhere in this work.<sup>161</sup> For now, however, it will be sufficient to note the appearance of Odaenathus on the historical record at this time, and his command of a substantial Palmyrene military force which was capable of inflicting defeats upon the Persians. He first appears in the confused aftermath of the defeat and capture of Valerian by the Persians in A.D. 260. Leading a considerable force of soldiers, Odaenathus restored the stability of the Roman East by defeating the imperial pretenders Macrianus and Quietus at Emesa in 261. After this, he avenged the defeat of Valerian by Shapur I by defeating the Persian forces and driving them out of Roman territory.<sup>162</sup> Thus, in short order Odaenathus restored a deteriorating situation in the East, and preserved Roman rule there. There are, however, numerous questions which need to be asked about this sudden manifestation of Palmyrene military power. Where did these troops come from, and how did a Palmyrene aristocrat come to be leading

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<sup>160</sup> See II. 6 and III. 7 above.

<sup>161</sup> See Appendix D.

<sup>162</sup> For the campaigns of Odaenathus against the Persians and against Roman usurpers see *HA* Valer. IV. 2-4; *Gall.* III. 1-5; X. 1-8; *Trig. Tyr.* XV. 1-5; XVIII. 1-3; *Orac. Syb.* XIII. 155-171; *IGRR* III. 1032; *Festus Brev.* XXIII. 64. 13-18; *Eutropius* IX. 10; *Jerome Chron.* a. 266; *Orosius Adv. Pag.* VII. 22. 12; *Continuator of Dio Cassius (FHG* IV. 197) III. 744; *Zosimus* I. 39. 1-2; *Zonaras* XII. 24.

the armies of Rome in the East? The possible relationship of Palmyra's caravan trade with the rise of Odaenathus and of an independent role for Palmyra also needs to be discussed.

The appearance of Odaenathus leading a force of Palmyrene military certainly does appear to have been quite sudden. Formerly, it was held that Odaenathus inherited his position and titles from one Septimius Hairan, either his father or elder brother, who in turn inherited them from an Odaenathus the elder who is envisaged as living in the first half of the third century.<sup>163</sup> It now appears that this position should be rejected: the recent discovery of an inscription makes it most likely that there never was an Odaenathus the elder, and that the title of *Ras Tadmor*, the first of the series of titles held by Septimius Odaenathus, was invented for Septimius Odaenathus himself.<sup>164</sup> Thus, the appearance of Odaenathus at the head of substantial military forces to restore the situation after Shapur's defeat of Valerian in 260 was both sudden and wholly unprecedented. In recognition of his victories, and of his status as the only significant pro-Roman military power left in the East, Odaenathus was honoured by the Emperor Gallienus with the title *Corrector Totius Orientis* or something similar: whether or not this was an 'official' Roman title, it was undoubtedly recognition of Odaenathus' military supremacy in the East. In addition, he had at some time prior to this been given the title *ὑπατικός*, which may mean that he was made governor of Syria Coele but probably was merely intended to honour

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<sup>163</sup> For this position see H. Ingholt "Varia Tadmorea", 115-136.

<sup>164</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Les princes de Palmyre" *Syria* 62 (1985), 251-261; D. Potter *Prophecy & History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford 1990), 381-388.

him with consular rank.<sup>165</sup> In the years following, Odaenathus is attested as leading his troops to several victories over the Persians, perhaps even advancing as far as Ctesiphon.<sup>166</sup> Thus, from 261 until he and his son Septimius Hairan were murdered in 267, he continued to campaign against the Persians and against Roman pretenders, maintaining loyalty to Gallienus throughout.

From where then did Odaenathus obtain the troops with which he defeated the Persians in 261, and were they Palmyrene or Roman? It is, in fact, impossible to tell, but it should be noted that many historical writers speaking of this era refer to Odaenathus gathering his forces from the countryside rather than collecting the remaining Roman forces in the area.<sup>167</sup> In addition, Zosimus (admittedly a very late source) specifically states that Odaenathus used “his own troops” combined with the remaining Roman forces in the area.<sup>168</sup> Given Odaenathus’ apparent headship of Palmyra in the years preceding 261, as discussed in Appendix D, it is more than likely that his troops in the first instance were Palmyrenes. Of course, as his influence and prestige increased during the 260’s, and as he was awarded Roman military titles such as *corrector*, regular Roman troops in the area would have come under his command also. The most likely place for his initial forces to have come from, however, is the Palmyrene caravan police, or militia, which as we have seen had been active throughout the third century. While the military organisation of a small militia may well have been insufficient for the campaigns of Odaenathus, it would have provided him with a nucleus of experienced troops which could have been rapidly expanded to

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<sup>165</sup> For Odaenathus’ titles and their significance see Appendix D.

<sup>166</sup> *HA* Gall. 10. 6-8; 12. 1; Trig. Tyr. 15. 4; Festus *Brev.* XXIII. 64. 13-18; Eutropius IX. 10; Jerome *Chron.* a. 266; Orosius *Adv. Pag.* VII. 22. 12; Zosimus I. 39. 2

meet the emergency: the existence of the caravan guards combined with the large number of Roman auxiliary units from Palmyra show that Palmyra was a good recruiting ground, and there was thus most likely a good nucleus of trained troops available to Odaenathus, as well as a sizable pool of manpower which he could use to expand these forces.

This independent military role also raises questions about the status of Palmyra itself during the 260's, which will also be discussed in Appendix D. In effect, Palmyra appears to have become in fact if not in law an allied state instead of a provincial city:<sup>169</sup> the Roman titles of Odaenathus do not disguise the Palmyrene base of his power nor the Palmyrene origin of his forces. It is clear that, rather than waiting upon Gallienus to rescue them in the aftermath of the defeat of Valerian, the Palmyrenes instead acted upon their own initiative (or that of Odaenathus himself) to restore the situation. To what extent, then, did the needs of the caravan trade or the effects of that trade help make this sequence of events come about?

While it is impossible to prove trade motives in Palmyra's actions in the 260's, the difficulties which the trade appears to have encountered in the third century, coupled with the significant place which trade held in Palmyrene society, would make it quite likely that the needs of the caravan trade lay behind at least some Palmyrene actions in this period. There is no doubt that the trade would have been adversely affected by the circumstances of the third century which were outlined above: the frequent outbreaks of war with the Sassanids would have halted the traffic

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<sup>167</sup> Festus *Brev.* XXIII. 64. 13-18; Jerome *Chron.* a. 226; Orosius *Adv. Pag.* VII. 22. 12; Continuator of Dio Cassius (*FHG* IV. 197) III. 744.

<sup>168</sup> Zosimus I. 39. 1

<sup>169</sup> D.L. Kennedy *JNES* 50 (1991), 76; *JRS* 85 (1995), 243.

on many occasions, while the general economic crisis of the third century would probably have caused a downturn in demand for the goods in the markets of the Empire. Accordingly, it is quite possible that Palmyra was interested in defending and protecting its trade routes, and this may account for Odaenathus acting to defeat the invading Persians who were disrupting the trade and thus affecting the prosperity of the city.

However, the Persian invasions were disrupting a great deal more than just the caravan trade, and it is altogether possible that the Palmyrenes felt their city itself, as well as the other cities of the Roman East, was in danger of destruction. It is certainly true that there would have been more than the disruption of their city's income to concern the Palmyrenes: they may well (and with some justification) have considered their very existence was at stake. When Shapur defeated and captured Valerian, it must have seemed to the inhabitants of the East that Rome was now unable to protect them: Palmyra thus took matters into its own hands, and Odaenathus, leading the military forces of Palmyra, opposed the Persians and crushed Roman usurpers in the region. Thus, as the representative of the legitimate emperor at Rome (formalised after 261 by his appointment as *corrector* ), Odaenathus restored the situation in the East. Despite the undoubted existence of trade motives as possible explanations for this action, it would seem likely that motives of survival would have overshadowed them in the circumstances of this period. Nevertheless, we should not discard trade motives altogether: it may well have been thought that by seizing the effective reins of power in the East, Palmyra would be able to halt the drift of the trade away from war-

ravaged Mesopotamia and Syria to northern Arabia and Egypt.<sup>170</sup> Thus, while motives of survival in the face of the Persian threat are likely to have been paramount in the formulation of Palmyrene policy, the imperatives of Palmyra's trade would not have been far behind.

There is, however, one way in which it can be said that the caravan trade *did* influence the appearance of Palmyra as an independent power, and that is by the existence of a military capacity at Palmyra. As has been seen, it is quite likely that the pre-existing Palmyrene militia was used as the core of the forces deployed by Odentathus in 261 and afterward. Such a force would never have been available if Palmyra had not depended so much upon its caravan traffic. However, the existence of such forces, combined with their experience in desert warfare, made Palmyra capable of resisting the Persians in a way that was not available to any of the other communities of Roman Syria. In addition, the wealth which had come to Palmyra by the conduct of its trade may well have contributed to its ability to raise military forces in these circumstances. In this way, then, it can be said that the caravan trade may have influenced the course of events at Palmyra and in Roman Syria during the 260's A.D.

After the death of Odaenathus in A.D. 267, however, the nature of the Palmyrene state and its relations with Rome underwent a dramatic change, leading eventually to the siege and destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian in 272-273. While, as we have seen, trade motivations lie in the background in the development of Palmyra's independent role prior to 267, it may be that more concrete commercial

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<sup>170</sup> D.L. Kennedy *JRS* 85, 243.



motivations influenced the policy followed by Zenobia after that date, and contributed to the ultimate collision with the interests and power of Rome.

### *Zenobia and the Break with Rome*

Upon the death of Odaenathus and his son in A.D. 267, the reins of power at Palmyra were taken by Odaenathus' widow Zenobia, ruling in the name of her son Vaballathus (Wahballat) who was still a minor. Initially, it would seem that Vaballathus simply claimed the titles of *Corrector* and King or "King of Kings", all of which were probably titles inherited from Odaenathus.<sup>171</sup> While the milestones from which Vaballathus' titulature is obtained are undated, it would seem logical that the ones explicitly claiming imperial power would come from later in the revolt, whereas those using similar titles to those Odaenathus is known to have used would appear to have come from soon after 267. These titles are seen on a milestone from the *Via Nova Traiana*, which bears a fragmentary Greek inscription with a more complete Palmyrene version:

'LH [YWH] WZKWITH DY SPTYMWS  
 WHBLT 'TNDR[WS NHY]R' MLK MLK'  
 W'PNRTT' DY MDNḤ' KLH BR  
 SPT[YMY]WS ['DYNṬ MLK] MLK' W'L  
 ḤYH DY SPTYMY' BṬZBY NHYRT'  
 MLKṬ' 'MH DY MLK MLK'  
 BT 'NTYWKWS

For the safety and victory of Septimius Vaballathus Athenodorus, illustrious King of Kings, *Corrector* of the whole East, son of Septimius Odenathus King of Kings, and also for Septimia Bath-Zabbai (i.e. Zenobia), illustrious Queen, mother of the King of Kings, daughter of Antiochus.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>171</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 393. See Appendix D.

<sup>172</sup> CIS II. 3971

In this titulature there would seem to be no explicit claim for imperial power, but only for acceptance of the role and titles which Odaenathus had borne. Whether or not Vaballathus actually was entitled to these positions in the eyes of the emperor or of the provincial officials of the area is another question which may have some significance for the outbreak of the revolt, but will be more fully examined in the next subsection. Regardless, the placing of this milestone on the *Via Nova* would seem to indicate *de facto* power in the area after 267, so it would seem that Zenobia was successful in the first instance in transferring the power held by Odaenathus to herself and her young son.

In about 270, however, the first indications of trouble begin. In that year, Zenobia seems to have sent Zabda, a Palmyrene general, to invade Egypt. Prior to this, however, or perhaps in the course of the same campaign, there seems to have been an attack on the headquarters of the *Legio III Cyrenaica* at Bostra by Palmyrene forces. An inscription from the temple of Jupiter Hammon at Bostra stated that the temple had been destroyed *a Palmyrenis hostibus*,<sup>173</sup> and the Byzantine chronicler Malalas recorded that the Palmyrenes invaded Arabia and killed the *dux* Trassus during the reign of Claudius Gothicus, from A.D. 268-270.<sup>174</sup> After this, it would appear that Palmyrene troops invaded Egypt, overcoming the resistance of the Roman forces there commanded by Tenagino Probus.<sup>175</sup> In addition, Zosimus records that Zenobia invaded Asia Minor as well, capturing territory as far as Ancyra.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *IGLS* XIII. 1. 9107

<sup>174</sup> Malalas XII. 299. 3-10

<sup>175</sup> *HA* Div. Claud. XI. 1-2; Probus IX. 5; Zosimus I. 44. 1-2.

<sup>176</sup> Zosimus I. 50

Despite these apparently aggressive and rebellious attacks, the evidence would seem to indicate that a full-fledged revolt from Rome was still not envisaged. Coins issued at Antioch from this period bear the portraits of both Aurelian and Vaballathus; Aurelian is styled as Augustus while Vaballathus is called variously *Rex*, *Imperator* and *Dux Romanorum*, but never Augustus until the closing stages of the revolt, when the portrait of Aurelian disappears.<sup>177</sup> A similar range of titles is seen in other evidence from the period, such as milestones from Arabia and papyri from Egypt, as will be discussed below. It would seem that even after the invasion of Egypt the Palmyrenes were hoping for imperial recognition of their conquests, with Vaballathus occupying a position of authority over the East subordinate to Aurelian, the sole Augustus.

It would seem, however, that such recognition was not to be forthcoming. In the course of A.D. 271, Aurelian's portrait no longer appears on coins from Antioch, and is replaced with coins issued in the name of Vaballathus Augustus and Zenobia Augusta. From the same period also comes another milestone, claiming full imperial titulature for Vaballathus, including the title of Augustus:

Im[p]. Caesari L. Iulio  
Aurelio Septimio  
Vaballatho  
Athenodoro Per-  
sico Maximo Ara-  
bico Maximo Adia-  
benico Maximo Pio  
Felici Inuicto Au[g].

To the Emperor Caesar L. Julius Aurelius Septimius Vaballathus Athenodorus Persicus Maximus Arabicus Maximus Adiabenicus Maximus Pius Felix Invictus Augustus.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>177</sup> R. Stoneman *Palmyra and its Empire*, 117-118.

<sup>178</sup> *ILS* 8924

It is most likely that these coins and inscriptions date from a time when the breach with Aurelian was seen as irreversible, perhaps even after he had commenced military operations to bring Palmyra to heel. The course of Aurelian's campaign of A.D. 272 is given in Zosimus and the *Historia Augusta*: after recapturing Ancyra and Tyana, he defeated the Palmyrene forces at Antioch and Emesa and then invested Palmyra itself. Zenobia attempted to flee to the Persians and was captured, whereupon Palmyra surrendered. After initially sparing the city, Aurelian sacked it after another uprising, probably in 273.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, in this way the city of Palmyra lost its independence. Despite the fact that the site was not abandoned, the city ceased to be of importance to the caravan trade, and there are no more caravan inscriptions from this time onward. Having then given an outline of the revolt, and especially the Palmyrene attitude to the imperial government in Rome as revealed in coins and inscriptions, it will now be appropriate to see what can be inferred about the causes of this revolt, and whether or not these causes are related to the Eastern caravan trade.

### *Commercial Motivations in the Palmyrene Revolt*

Why then did Zenobia embark upon such a revolt which must inevitably have brought the retribution of Rome upon her city? Several differing explanations have been put forward, including the possibility that the revolt was occasioned by trade motives. Schwartz has suggested that Palmyra's revolt arose out of a need to protect

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<sup>179</sup> Zosimus I. 50-56, 59-61; *HA* Aurel. 25-31.

the interests of Palmyrene merchants in the unsettled circumstances of the third century, since the trade routes were beginning to drift away from Palmyra and Rome at that time was not interested in the preservation of Palmyra's economic prosperity.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, he sees the invasion of Egypt as motivated by the need to secure the interests of Palmyrene merchants there, who were suffering the effects of the disturbances which racked Egypt during the later third century.<sup>181</sup> It may also be possible that such motives could explain the attack on Bostra mentioned earlier, as the trade route which reached Bostra by the Wadi Sirhan may have been receiving trade which once would have passed through Palmyra.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to see why these considerations would have led to open revolt, and therefore to the inevitability of Roman reprisal. Surely long-term commercial interests alone could not have dictated such a dangerous policy as attacking Egypt, one of Rome's most valuable provinces. While the commercial vocation of Palmyra may well have had some bearing on the course of events, it is not likely to have been the only consideration. Indeed, it would seem difficult to justify such acts as the invasion of southern Asia Minor if Palmyra's motives were purely commercial, as there is no evidence that Palmyrene merchants ever operated in this area.<sup>182</sup> While it is certainly possible that the caravan trade may have been a consideration in the decision to attack Egypt and/or Bostra, it is not likely to have been the only determining factor behind the policy of Zenobia and Vaballathus.

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<sup>180</sup> J. Schwartz "L'empire romain et le commerce oriental" *Annales* (Jan.-Feb. 1960), 18-44.

<sup>181</sup> J. Schwartz "Palmyre et l'opposition à Rome en Égypte" in *Palmyre: Bilan et perspectives*, 139-151. For Palmyrenes in Egypt and the disturbances in third century Egypt see II. 6 above.

<sup>182</sup> R. Stoneman *Palmyra and its Empire*, 161.

Another possibility that might be considered is that Zenobia's rebellion should be seen as an Arab 'nationalist' revolt against the power of Rome. Such notions, however, should be rejected: for one thing, the adoption by Vaballathus of "Arabicus" as one of his victory-titles indicates that the Palmyrenes did not consider themselves Arabs.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, the claim of imperial titles, especially at the close of the revolt, would seem to indicate that what was being sought was some sort of accommodation *within* the Roman system - when there finally seemed no likelihood of accommodation with Aurelian, Vaballathus at last claimed the title of Augustus which he does not seem to have taken in the early stages of the revolt. Thus, his claims seem to move away from peculiarly Palmyrene titles toward more universalist, Roman ones as the revolt progressed. This is hardly what would be expected of a separatist, nationalist movement. Equally, however, the revolt cannot be seen as a simple imperial usurpation as was common throughout the empire in the third century, and reasonably frequent in the East.<sup>184</sup> The presence of titles such as "King" in Vaballathus' titulature,<sup>185</sup> coupled with the absence of a full imperial claim until near the end of the revolt, would indicate that Vaballathus was not originally intending to claim the empire as Macrianus and Quietus had done in 261.

The true answer to the origin of Palmyra's revolt against Rome probably lies in the political situation of the later third century. It is quite possible that the revolt may have been occasioned by the same perceived needs which caused Odaenathus to lift Palmyra to the status of an independent power in the previous decade, and the

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<sup>183</sup> *ILS* 8924. See F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 220-221.

<sup>184</sup> J. Eadie "One Hundred Years of Rebellion: The Eastern Army in Politics, A.D. 175-272" in D.L. Kennedy (ed.) *The Roman Army in the East*, 135-151.

perceived necessity to maintain that status after the death of Odaenathus. Some of the factors which created this necessity in the minds of Zenobia and her advisors may well have been associated with the caravan traffic; others, as in the time of Odaenathus, will have been more to do with the continued survival of Palmyra itself. At the accession of Vaballathus, Palmyra already possessed a great deal of power and influence. Whatever the formal status of the city, it would seem that it was in effect the premier power in the East: this in itself would seem to militate against the revolt being a 'grab for power' on the part of Zenobia and Vaballathus, as considerable power was in their hands already. It is possible, however, that with the death of Odaenathus and the defeat of the Persians, the provincial authorities of the East refused to recognise Vaballathus' inheritance of his father's titles, and thus the Palmyrene forces attacked the regular Roman forces in Bostra, Egypt and Asia Minor in order to compel their allegiance to Vaballathus, and to maintain rather than to expand the dominant position of Palmyra in the East.<sup>186</sup>

Thus, in this view it is not Palmyrene aggrandisement that was to blame in causing the revolt, but rather a desire to maintain what Odaenathus had already won. It may well have been thought by Zenobia and her advisers that in order to maintain the stability of the East, the supremacy of Palmyra should be maintained, as only Palmyra had shown itself capable of defeating the Persians and maintaining order. Equally, it is possible that the officials of other provincial cities felt that, now the great general Odaenathus was dead, there was no longer any reason to follow Palmyra's lead. The absence of an effective imperial force in the East since 260 must

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<sup>185</sup> *CIS* II. 3971; T. Bauzou "Deux milliaires inédits de Vaballath en Jordanie du Nord" in P. Freeman & D.L. Kennedy (eds.) *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East* I, 1-8.

have contributed to the feeling at Palmyra that the city's leadership of the East should be maintained in order to retain the stability won by Odaenathus: just as other parts of the empire such as Britain and Gaul were separating off at this time due to the perceived failure of the central administration to protect them, it would seem that Zenobia felt that only the continued domination of Palmyra could guarantee the stability of the East.<sup>187</sup> In any case, given the dominant position of Palmyra at the time, it is perhaps understandable that she was reluctant to let anyone else try. Thus, it is likely that Zenobia was motivated by the same reasons that had initially prompted Odaenathus to launch Palmyra as an independent power: the continued survival and stability of the Roman East.

Nevertheless, trade motives are likely to have figured in the thinking of Zenobia and her court at this time, even if such motives would have been secondary in nature to the desire for peace and stability. The series of wars with both Parthia and Sassanid Persia will have convinced the Palmyrenes that neither these powers nor Rome were especially interested in preserving the caravan traffic, despite the Roman desire to collect taxes from it. This will have caused economic pressure on the city, which was greatly exacerbated by the Persian invasions of the mid-third century coupled with the rampant inflation at Rome which can only have harmed Palmyrene markets. With Palmyra in its new position of power, however, the opportunity now existed for the city to exercise its strength to protect the caravan traffic. Of course, the maintenance of peace and security in the East would also have a beneficial effect on Palmyra's long-distance trade, and so we might see Palmyra's trade interests as part

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<sup>186</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 394.

<sup>187</sup> J. Eadie "One Hundred Years of Rebellion", 150.



of a broader picture which encouraged the Palmyrenes to try to retain their dominant position. Trade motives and political motives certainly do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive, especially in a city with such a dominant commercial vocation as Palmyra. Thus, we should probably understand the caravan trade as a motivating factor in Zenobia's actions in the period 267-272, but only as a part of the broader benefits of peace which Zenobia felt Palmyrene leadership alone was qualified to give the Roman East at that time.

The presence of such trade motivations may also explain some of the points of resistance to Palmyrene leadership. As has been noted, Palmyrene military action in 270 was directed at Bostra and Egypt, as well as Antioch and southern Asia Minor, as far as Ancyra and Tyana. While the attack on Asia Minor shows that Palmyra was not motivated by trading interests alone in this period, this may not have been the case with Egypt and Arabia. As has already been seen, during the third century Bostra (by means of the Wadi Sirhan) and Egypt were receiving trade which might otherwise have passed through Palmyra. While it is unlikely that Zenobia directly attacked these places to remove trade competition and thus incur the vengeance of Rome, it is possible that Egypt and Arabia were foremost among the areas which resisted Palmyrene rule due to conflicting trade interests with Palmyra. Indeed, Schwartz identified the merchants of Alexandria as a likely source of opposition to the Palmyrene presence in Egypt due to their conflicting commercial interests.<sup>188</sup> It is also possible that the Tanukh tribal coalition which is known to have been active at Umm el-Jimal in this period may have been responsible for resistance to Palmyra in the area

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<sup>188</sup> J. Schwartz "Palmyre et l'opposition à Rome en Égypte", 145-149.

of Bostra,<sup>189</sup> which may in turn indicate that the Tanukh were profiting from trade passing through the Wadi Sirhan and Bostra. Thus, the beginning of the Palmyrene revolt in 270 may have come about as an attempt by interests in Arabia and Egypt to break free of Palmyrene domination, which was then crushed by direct military intervention by Palmyra. This refusal to accept Palmyrene hegemony may itself have been partly motivated by trade considerations.

It is therefore possible that, at Palmyra at least, the 'revolt' might be seen as an attempt to reinstate legitimate (i.e. Palmyrene) authority against local commanders who, for one reason or another, decided to reject Palmyrene rule after the death of Odaenathus. If this is the case, it may be that Zenobia hoped that Aurelian would recognise the Palmyrene claim and support her. While events soon showed that this would not be the case, such a desire may be reflected in the apparently conciliatory titulature of Vaballathus after the invasion of Egypt, which appears to recognise Aurelian as sole Augustus, with Vaballathus as a subordinate ruler of the East. This is seen in papyri from Egypt during this period, which are dated by the regnal years of both Aurelian and Vaballathus, with Vaballathus in a subordinate position. These style Aurelian as "Imperator Caesar Lucius Domitius Aurelianus Pius Felix Augustus" and Vaballathus, in second place, as "Julius Aurelius Septimius Vaballathus, illustrious king, consul, Imperator, Strategos of the Romans".<sup>190</sup> A similar range of titles is seen in the Palmyrene coinage from Antioch which was discussed earlier. In these examples, Vaballathus' titulature has evidently advanced from the titles he inherited from Odaenathus (i.e. King and *Corrector*), but he is still placed as

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<sup>189</sup> G.W. Bowersock *Roman Arabia*, 136.

<sup>190</sup> *P.Oxy* 1264. 20-27

subordinate to Aurelian. It would thus seem that Zenobia and Vaballathus were hoping that Aurelian would recognise their position, and legitimise Palmyrene dominance of the East. It was Aurelian's reaction that made the Palmyrene invasion a 'revolt': clearly he thought that Zenobia had gone too far, or he simply decided that it was time to rein in such independent powers as Palmyra and Tetricus in Gaul.

The sources are really far too fragmentary to insist on any single explanation to the extraordinary series of events in the Roman East in the period between 267 and 272. It would seem, however, that the revolt should be distinguished from other imperial usurpations of the era, as it should be distinguished from a nationalist uprising. Instead, the model which has been presented here, of the Palmyrenes attempting to cling to the position they had gained in the previous decade, would seem to explain the evidence in a satisfactory manner. In this view, the caravan trade assumes some importance, especially in explaining the reluctance of the authorities in Egypt and Arabia to submit to Palmyrene rule. The Palmyrenes would have felt that they alone could guarantee the peace and security that the East needed: moreover, such circumstances obviously favoured their caravan trade. Other authorities in the East, however, did not share this view: part of what motivated this may have been the reluctance to part with commerce which the Palmyrenes would have been keen to see passing through Palmyra again. When these two conflicting views came into conflict, it was Aurelian's decision to back the provincial authorities in Arabia, Egypt and Asia Minor that sealed the fate of Palmyra.

### *The Effects of Palmyra's Fall*

The destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian seems to have brought the caravan trade of Palmyra to a close. There are no more caravan inscriptions after 272, and no evidence to indicate that the trade survived the destruction of the city. There is evidence of continuing trade elsewhere in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia, although there is no reason to believe that this trade only appeared after the fall of Palmyra: it is far more likely that it had co-existed all throughout the period of Palmyrene ascendancy, although in the third century it would presumably have been affected by the same conditions that damaged Palmyra's trade at that time.<sup>191</sup> In addition, the 'trade fair' which Ammianus mentions existing at Batnae in the fourth century<sup>192</sup> is not likely to have emerged as a replacement for such an event at Palmyra, as Stoneman suggests: rather, Batnae is likely to have been a trade centre throughout the entire period.<sup>193</sup>

It would seem that instead of imagining the trade routes being 'relocated' elsewhere after the fall of Palmyra, we should perhaps view the fall as representing the removal of one of a number of co-existing trade routes in Syria and Mesopotamia. As has already been noted, it would seem that it was mainly the Palmyrenes themselves who used the route through Palmyra: the Greek, Jewish and Syrian merchants active in Mesopotamia had probably continued to use the Euphrates route all along, and no doubt continued to do so after the fall of Palmyra. The absence of competition from Palmyrene merchants may have enabled these merchants to obtain higher prices for a while, but the volume or price of the goods at Rome and in the

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<sup>191</sup> For a discussion of the commerce in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia see V. 1 below.

Empire is not likely to have been substantially affected. Indeed, the 'normalisation' of the Roman East by Aurelian and the conclusion of peace with the Persians after his death<sup>194</sup> is more likely to have improved trading conditions.

Thus, the only ones dramatically affected by the fall of Palmyra would seem to have been the Palmyrenes themselves. It would seem that the events of 272-273 had left them without the infrastructure and ability to continue to participate in the trade. Despite this the city was not completely destroyed, and we have evidence that some institutions of Palmyrene life continued for some time after 273. Bilingual Greek/Palmyrene texts in the traditional style have been found in the Great Colonnade dating from A.D. 279/280,<sup>195</sup> which shows that the city was neither completely destroyed nor deserted, and the Palmyrenes were not dispossessed or massacred completely when Aurelian took their city for the second time. Indeed, it would seem that some of the Palmyrene aristocracy had co-operated with the Romans and retained their position of influence after the fall of the city. An inscription of 273 or later records that Haddudan son of Ogeilu, who was of Roman senatorial rank, had helped the troops of Aurelian and had been president of a religious banqueting association.<sup>196</sup> It would also seem that the cults of the city continued to function: the temples of Bel, Baalshamin and Arsu continued to function while the temple of Allat was incorporated into the camp of the Roman garrison.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Amm. Marc. XIV. 4. 3

<sup>193</sup> R. Stoneman *Palmyra and its Empire*, 19, 48. See V. 1 for discussion.

<sup>194</sup> *HA* Prob. 17

<sup>195</sup> K. As'ad & M. Gawlikowski "New Honorific Inscriptions in the Great Collonade of Palmyra", 164, nos. 7-8.

<sup>196</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Inscriptions de Palmyre" *Syria* 48 (1971), 407, 412-421.

<sup>197</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 335.

From these pieces of evidence it would certainly appear that many of the institutions of Palmyra continued for a period after 273, including the cults of the city, at least a part of the old aristocracy of the town, and the use of Palmyrene in commemorative inscriptions. Nonetheless, these institutions do appear to have gradually died out over the succeeding years: we hear no more of the Palmyrene aristocracy, and the inscriptions of 279/280 are the last that we know of in the Palmyrene language. This would appear to have been a natural process of assimilation into the Roman world, however, rather than a deliberate suppression of Palmyrene 'uniqueness' by the Romans, as has been suggested.<sup>198</sup> Rather, it would seem that, with the caravan trade removed, the consequent lack of wealth in the city, and the close proximity of a large garrison of Roman troops, the things that had made Palmyra distinctive gradually disappeared, and Palmyra became a normal garrison town of Roman Syria.

The cessation of the long distance trade through Palmyra should thus probably be viewed as the result of the loss of the infrastructure which had made this commerce possible in the first place. One of the primary factors would have been the removal of the caravan guards, who had been used by Palmyra to keep the caravan routes safe. Given that these troops had probably been used to form the nucleus of the Palmyrene army in the 260's and 270's, it is hardly surprising that Romans would not allow this organisation to continue. In addition, the sack of the city and the probable destruction of much of the old aristocracy of the town probably would have significantly reduced or removed altogether the capability of organising and financing the expensive caravan

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<sup>198</sup> D. Graf "Rome and the Saracens", 392-400.

expeditions. Thus, despite the fact that the Romans do not appear to have suppressed all the institutions of Palmyrene life, it would seem that the sack of the city in A.D. 273 dealt the Palmyrene long-distance trade a blow from which it could not recover.

The significance which the trade had held at Palmyra may even be indicated by the gradual demise of Palmyra's unique qualities in the years following the Roman sack and the loss of the trade. With the loss of the trade, and perhaps more specifically the wealth which had been generated by the trade, the distinctiveness which had characterised Palmyra receded, and slowly the city declined. While there would certainly have been other factors which contributed to this decline, we cannot exclude from among them the loss of the caravan trade upon which much of Palmyra's wealth had been based.

Thus, the fall of Palmyra in A.D. 272 and the sack in the following year had significant effects on Palmyrene society, including the loss of the caravan trade and the gradual disappearance of many distinctive features of that society. Nonetheless, the effects on other societies of the East, and upon the other caravan routes in the eastern trade, would appear to have been minimal. Indeed, the restoration of normality in the East, and perhaps the removal of Palmyrene economic and military power, may well have been looked upon with favour by the other merchants of the eastern trade.

### *Conclusion*

There are, as we have seen, several areas which can be identified by which the long-distance caravan trade which passed through Palmyra influenced or may have influenced the course of events in the Roman East in the third century A.D. Even

though, as has been seen, there were important non-commercial interests which affected the course of events and the Palmyrene decision to take an independent role in the affairs of the East, commercial motives may well have also been influential to some extent. Indeed, it is difficult to fully separate these commercial and non-commercial motives, as the caravan commerce was intimately tied up with the general prosperity and even survival of Palmyra.

The gradually worsening state of the caravan trade in the third century, particularly the trouble which was being experienced with nomads, may well have made the Palmyrenes strengthen their militia of caravan guards, which in itself made it a more formidable military force. In addition, the success of the Sassanids in the middle of the third century and the apparent impotence of the Roman government in the face of this success created the impression at Palmyra, as it did elsewhere in the Empire, that the provinces of the Empire had to look to their own resources in order to protect themselves. The pre-existence of a military capacity at Palmyra and the perception that Rome could not be relied upon to keep them safe urged the Palmyrenes to take an independent military role.

The preservation and maintenance of the caravan trade routes probably played a significant part in the determination of Palmyrene policy in the period A.D. 261-272, given the already demonstrated importance of this trade to Palmyra. It may also have been commercial considerations which led to the attacks on Arabia and Egypt in 270, which in turn led to the breach with Rome and the final destruction of Palmyra in 272. While some Palmyrene actions of the period, such as the invasion of Asia Minor, show that trade was not the only determinant of policy in the period, the significance



of both Egypt and Arabia to the eastern trade, and the possible opposition which may have come about between the Red Sea trade and the commerce through the Wadi Sirhan on the one hand and the Palmyrene commerce on the other, make it possible that trade was a factor. Indeed, it may have been some tension between the officials of Bostra and Zenobia's government in Palmyra over trade that caused Palmyrene military intervention there.

Whether or not this was the case, it is certainly true that the Palmyrene caravan commerce was brought to a halt by the sack of the city by Aurelian's forces in 273. It is clear that, despite the fact that there does not appear to have been a concerted attempt by the Romans to suppress a distinctive Palmyrene identity, Palmyra no longer possessed the capacity to participate in the trade. Devoid of its caravan guards and perhaps a significant part of the aristocracy that had financed the commerce, Palmyra became another frontier city of the Roman East much the same as many others.

#### **IV.6 Conclusion**

Palmyra was clearly no ordinary city of the Roman East. For a number of reasons, prominent among which must be the role of the city's commerce, it stands apart from all the other centres of this region. While the notion that the city was ruled by a class of "merchant princes", as Rostovtzeff suggested, should be rejected, we can nonetheless identify many ways in which the caravan trade at Palmyra influenced the social and political setup of the city, and also contributed to the city's final clash with Rome which ended in its destruction and the end of its caravan trade.

The caravan trade through Palmyra appears to have arisen by the initiative of the pastoral Palmyrene nobility, who used their resources and knowledge of the desert environment to create a trade route on which Palmyra could prosper. These men organised and equipped caravan expeditions which were composed of merchants of whom we know little. They appear, however, to have usually been Palmyrenes themselves, and may well have often financed their participation in the caravan by a loan from the caravan leader or another of Palmyra's magnates. In the course of these expeditions, difficulties of various sorts often needed to be overcome, ranging from nomad attacks to recalcitrant customs officials. In many cases, upon the successful completion of the expedition, the actions of various individuals to help the caravan were commemorated by prominent public inscriptions in such places as the Agora or the main street of the city.

The high prominence given these inscriptions seems to reflect the significant role that the caravan trade had in the city. Despite the fact that the rulers of Palmyra were not, in the first instance at least, "merchant princes", it is evident that they appreciated the important role that the trade had in the city and to their own prosperity. The very prominence of the commemorative inscriptions, and the evident pride with which the magnates of the city described their participation in and support of the caravan trade, clearly attest the high regard in which the caravan trade and its practitioners were held at Palmyra. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the recording of services to caravans as a part of a prominent citizen's *cursus honorum*: such a commemoration would be unheard of in Rome or indeed throughout much of

the Empire, but it was considered appropriate at Palmyra. It is quite evident that the caravan trade at Palmyra occupied a position of extraordinary prominence.

The reason for this prominence is not hard to find. The wealth of this city which is so readily discernible even today in the physical remains of the town can hardly be ascribed to agriculture or the other normal sources of wealth in the Roman Empire. Sited as it is on the margins of the desert, the wealth that Palmyra commanded and which allowed it to construct such magnificent buildings and for a brief time rise to great prominence in the affairs of the Roman East can only have come from the caravan trade. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find the commerce occupying a position of great importance at Palmyra.

In addition, the caravan trade has been shown to have affected other areas of Palmyrene life. The existence of an independent Palmyrene military organisation, whatever its exact structure might have been, was the result of the need to protect the caravan trade from the depredations of bandits in the desert region between Palmyra and the Euphrates. The military experience which was gained from this patrolling probably influenced the substantial use of Palmyrene recruits in the Roman army, as well as the considerable number of equestrian military officers who appear to have come from Palmyra. Indeed, the wealth generated by the caravan trade would possibly also have contributed to the large number of equestrian officers from Palmyra.

The significance of the trade in the tumultuous events of the third century, however, are rather more obscure. Given the deteriorating political situation at the time, it is perhaps more likely that motives of simple survival caused the Palmyrenes under Odaenathus to take an independent military and political role. Nonetheless, the

existence of the Palmyrene caravan militia and the considerable experience gained in patrolling the desert no doubt contributed to Odaenathus' ability to raise his forces and defeat the Persians, and so the caravan trade can be seen as contributing indirectly to the rise of Palmyra at this time. Similarly, the trade does not appear to have had a direct influence upon Palmyrene relations with Rome in the period leading to the destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian in 273. However, it is possible that the reluctance of some Roman provincial authorities to submit to Palmyrene authority after the death of Odaenathus may have caused the Palmyrene breach with Rome, and this in turn may have been caused by trade influences. Despite this, it would appear that in general the interests of the long-distance caravan trade were of a secondary nature in determining Palmyrene policy in the third century.

It would thus seem clear that the caravan trade with the head of the Persian Gulf had a significant effect on the city of Palmyra, both economically, politically and socially. Indeed, these effects would appear to have been more pronounced at Palmyra than at any other site in the Roman East. Nonetheless, these effects appear to have been confined to Palmyra itself. Palmyra was allowed to chart the course it took due to the lucrative tax revenue that the trade brought to the Roman treasury, but in no case can it be seen that the needs of Palmyra or the trade which was centred there was allowed to influence Roman policy in the region. The trade route through Palmyra, and the attendant prosperity of the city, came about through the initiative of the Palmyrenes themselves. The lack of interest which the Romans showed in the trade is no better attested by the lack of compunction they had in destroying Palmyra

when it stood in the way of their political ambitions. Clearly, the economic needs of the trade and of Palmyra were of no importance compared to Roman imperial glory.

## V. TRADE IN SYRIA AND THE NORTH

Although the trade routes north of Palmyra lack splendid ruins, such as those of Palmyra and Petra, to attest to their existence, or inscriptional evidence, such as the Palmyrene caravan texts, to allow close study, nonetheless there is some evidence to show that merchants made use of the routes which departed from Antioch and crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma. Among these was the route which became the famous 'Silk Road' in Medieval times, as well as the route along the Euphrates described by Isidore which gave access to Mesopotamia and the Gulf.

These routes crossed an area that was often disputed by the Roman Empire and its Iranian opponents, the Parthian and then the Sassanid Persian states. Thus, in this area the eastern long-distance trade had the potential at least to be of some political significance, and perhaps even a factor in the determination of foreign policy by either of the two powers. Although in the studies conducted up to this point we have found no apparent Roman interest in directing or manipulating the spice trade in any way, or indeed in allowing it any significant input into their foreign policy, it may be that the area of the Euphrates valley could be an exception. Indeed, if the spice trade was ever going to be a political factor as far as the imperial government was concerned, we might expect it to have been in this area that such would be the case. Accordingly, it is proposed in this section to study the routes of the trade in the region of Mesopotamia and Syria, as well as to study evidence for either Roman or Parthian political interest in the trade.

## **V.1 The Northern Routes and the "Silk Road"**

As will be seen, the trade routes of Syria and Northern Mesopotamia seem to have been used throughout the period of study by a variety of Greek, Syrian and Jewish merchants, and may well have contributed a greater share of the trade than the surviving evidence might suggest. As with many areas of history, our knowledge of the eastern commerce must be a function of the evidence which we are able to study. The mere fact that more evidence has survived from Palmyra or Egypt is no proof that in ancient times these trade routes were of greater significance, so the evidence which deals with the routes of Northern Mesopotamia must also be studied in the course of this work in order to give a more complete picture of the trade. Indeed, these northern routes are of particular significance given that they traverse one of the main areas of conflict between Rome and both Parthia and Sassanid Persia, the Euphrates Valley. Thus, it is possible that the trade routes in this area could have had some bearing on the strategies and policy of these powers in the course of their many conflicts. Even though in the course of this study we have found no evidence to suggest that the eastern long-distance trade was ever of significance in the determination of Roman policy, it may be that the northern routes provide an exception.

### *The Euphrates Route*

There is some literary evidence to suggest that some traders made use of the route which leaves Antioch and its surrounds and then crosses the Euphrates at Zeugma and proceeds down the Euphrates valley in order to reach the trading centres

of the Gulf. This evidence consists for the most part of scattered references which do not give any clear picture of these northern routes comparable to that of the commerce which passed through Palmyra. However, this is not to say that the evidence is without value: there is, as will be seen, enough evidence to attest the existence and use of the Euphrates route throughout the period under study. Certainly the use of these northern routes is attested after the destruction of Palmyra in A.D. 272; for example, Ammianus Marcellinus refers to the town of Batnae near the Euphrates not far from Zeugma as the site of a trade fair in the fourth century:

Batnae municipium in Anthemusia conditum Macedonum manu priscorum, ab Euphrate flumine breui spatio disparatur, refertum mercatoribus opulentis, ubi annua sollemnitate prope Septembris initium mensis, ad nundinas magna promiscuae fortunae conuenit multitudo, ad commercanda quae Indi mittunt et Seres, aliaque plurima uehi terra marique consueta.

Batnae is a town in Anthemusia founded by the ancient Macedonians, separated by a short distance from the Euphrates, which is filled with rich merchants when, during the annual festival held near the beginning of September, a great crowd of mixed fortune comes together for the fair, to buy and sell the things which the Indians and Chinese send, and many other things which are accustomed to be brought there by land and sea.<sup>1</sup>

Although it has been suggested that this trade fair only took place after Palmyra's destruction,<sup>2</sup> this is neither explicitly stated nor implied in the text, and it may very well be that Batnae had been an important centre for trade throughout the entire period. It would seem unlikely that Zeugma, long recognised as a site of great strategic importance due to the bridge crossing the Euphrates between it and Apamea on the opposite bank,<sup>3</sup> would only gain commercial significance at this late stage. It is far more likely that these routes had always been in use, and were used by Antiochene

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<sup>1</sup> Amm. Marc. XIV. 3. 3

<sup>2</sup> R. Stoneman *Palmyra and its Empire*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> J. Wagner *Seleucia am Euphrat / Zeugma* (Wiesbaden 1976), 71-82.



merchants, be they Greek, Syrian or Jewish, to reach the markets of Mesopotamia where silk and spices could be obtained for later resale within the Roman Empire. Indeed, as was noted in the introduction, Strabo mentioned merchants crossing the Euphrates (presumably at or near Zeugma) and then travelling toward Babylon through the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates.<sup>4</sup> Thus, at the beginning and the end of the period under consideration, there was commercial traffic using this route; there is no compelling reason to believe that it ceased in the intervening time. Despite the fact that there is nowhere near the amount of evidence for these routes available as there is for, say, the Palmyrene trade, we are still justified in concluding that there probably remained an appreciable amount of commercial traffic using the route which traversed the Euphrates valley from Zeugma to reach Mesopotamia.

Certainly, there were merchants active in Spasinou Charax, the terminus of the Palmyrene route, besides those who came there from Palmyra. Pliny, for example, refers to *nostrique negotiatores* who were active at Charax:<sup>5</sup> he is not likely to have used such an expression to describe Palmyrenes, but it is quite possible that these could have been Greek or Italian merchants from within the Empire. There is also evidence of Jewish merchants active in this area; indeed, there is evidence that some of these merchants reached positions of power and influence in the Kingdom of Mesene comparable to those held by Palmyrene merchants as outlined in the previous chapter.<sup>6</sup> Josephus, for example, mentions a Jewish merchant named Ananias who had access to the palace at Spasinou Charax and was able to teach his religion to some

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<sup>4</sup> Strabo *Geog.* XVI. 1. 27

<sup>5</sup> Pliny *NH* VI. 31

<sup>6</sup> IV. 1 above.

of the palace women and to a prince of Adiabene resident at that time in Charax.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, in order to have such influence he must have been highly regarded; although there is no evidence that he held a post comparable to the Palmyrene satraps of Tylos and Phorath, he was still obviously a man of influence. Evidently it was not just the Palmyrene merchants who were powerful and influential in Mesene, but others also. In the absence of any evidence for such merchants participating in the Palmyrene caravans, it would seem reasonable to assume that Ananias and those like him traded with Mesene by means of the Euphrates route.

### *The 'Silk Road'*

While indeed many may have used the Zeugma route to gain access to Mesopotamia and thence to the Gulf where traders could join the seaborne trade from India which was also being tapped by the merchants of Palmyra, the Euphrates crossing could also have been used to gain access to the overland silk routes into Central Asia. The major termini of these overland routes seem to have been the cities of Nisibis, where the activity of silk merchants is attested, and Ctesiphon/Seleucia on the Tigris, from which the Persian royal road, utilized also by the Parthians, ascended to the summer capital of Ecbatana and thence into Central Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Seleucia on the Tigris is mentioned as the site of a community of both Greek and Palmyrene merchants in a Palmyrene inscription from A.D. 19, which honours a

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<sup>7</sup> Josephus *AJ* XX. 3. 34

<sup>8</sup> D.L. Kennedy "Parthia and Rome: Eastern Perspectives" in D.L. Kennedy (ed.) *The Roman Army in the East*, 72.

benefactor of the temple of Bel at Palmyra.<sup>9</sup> Seleucia is not on the route of the normal Palmyrene commerce between Palmyra and Charax on the Gulf, and so presumably at this stage the Palmyrenes and the Greeks with them in Seleucia were interested in overland traffic coming along the Persian royal road from Central Asia. While Palmyrene interest soon shifted exclusively to the maritime route via the Gulf,<sup>10</sup> this inscription does demonstrate that there were trade opportunities of some sort in Seleucia on the Tigris. It may even be that, after the Palmyrenes had moved on, the Greek merchants in this city continued to trade there with caravans coming along the road from Ecbatana and Central Asia. Certainly these Greeks are not mentioned in connection with the Palmyrenes again in any of the Palmyrene caravan inscriptions. In any case, the existence of Seleucia as a place of trade can be considered proven, and with it the existence of overland trade entering Mesopotamia from Asia.

Similarly, Talmudic literature attests the presence at Nisibis of Jewish silk merchants<sup>11</sup>, although no accurate date can be given for this mention. It is clear, however, that in a later period when Nisibis lay near the boundary between the Roman and Sassanid realms, it was an important centre for international trade. In the treaty which was dictated to the Persians by the Romans in A.D. 299, it was specified that Nisibis, within Roman territory, would be the sole point of trade.<sup>12</sup> It would seem reasonable that if Nisibis was an important trade centre at that time that it could also have been one in the preceding period, and thus again we can postulate the existence of an overland trade route from Central Asia entering Mesopotamia, as

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<sup>9</sup> *Inv.* IX. 6 = *CIS* II. 3924

<sup>10</sup> Judging from their inscriptions, which never mention Seleucia again. See IV. 1 above.

<sup>11</sup> *Midrash Samuel* 10. 3

<sup>12</sup> *Petr. Patric. frag.* 13-14 *FHG* 4.188-189

Nisibis by its location cannot possibly have been involved in any other silk trade than one based upon an overland route.

While it might be argued, as with Batnae mentioned earlier, that this situation only arose after the fall of Palmyra, it would seem more likely that trade had been present at Nisibis prior to this time. As has been discussed earlier, the trade at Palmyra seems chiefly to have consisted of goods obtained by Palmyrene merchants from the sea trade between Charax and India: there is little or no evidence of this route being used by Greek, Syrian or Jewish merchants, or indeed by anyone except the Palmyrenes themselves. It would thus seem most likely that the Jewish merchants of Nisibis and Charax, along with other Greek and Syrian merchants, continued to use the Euphrates crossing at Zeugma to gain access to both the Gulf and the overland silk route throughout the whole period that the Palmyrene route was in use.

Indeed, we do have an account of a merchant apparently using the overland route into China during the Roman imperial period, well before the fall of Palmyra. Ptolemy records that the agents of one Maes Titianus, probably a Syrian merchant, made a long journey through Parthia and travelled as far as the 'Stone Tower', which must have been well into Central Asia. The case of Maes Titianus shows clearly that, despite the predominance of the Palmyrene maritime trade in our sources, there nonetheless existed opportunities to obtain silk from the overland route through Central Asia. The optimal time for this trade to have commenced is probably after the Chinese general P'an Chao established control over what the Chinese called the 'Western Regions', that is the Tarim basin, in A.D. 74. This would have increased the

opportunities for the free flow of silk along these routes,<sup>13</sup> and it is to this period that the expedition of Maes Titianus is probably to be allocated.

Maes himself seems to have been a Syrian by his Semitic name; he is described by Ptolemy as a Macedonian and so it is most likely that he was a Syrian who held citizenship of one of the Greek cities of Syria.<sup>14</sup> Ptolemy provides a brief account of the expedition, stating that he sent some of his agents toward China and that they went as far as a place called the 'Stone Tower', which lay on the border of China:

Μάην γάρ φησί τινα, τὸν καὶ Τιτιανόν, ἄνδρα Μακεδόνα καὶ ἐκ πατρὸς ἔμπορον, συγγράψασθαι τὴν ἀναμέτρησιν, οὐδ' αὐτὸν ἐπελθόντα, διαπεμψάμενον δέ τινας πρὸς τοὺς Σήρας.

For it is said that a certain Maes, who is also called Titianus, a Macedonian and a merchant like his father, had recorded the distance (i.e. to the Stone Tower), not having gone himself, but having sent certain men to China.<sup>15</sup>

It is evident from this account that, while most merchants would not have gone so far as Maes' agents did, the overland route to Central Asia was known and used during the period under consideration. Moreover, it is clear, as will be discussed in the next section, that there was mostly free access for Romans on this route: there is nothing to indicate that the Parthians or any other jealous 'middleman' tried to stop Maes' expedition.

Despite the feeling of some scholars that it was of only limited importance during this time,<sup>16</sup> the overland route seems to have existed as an important alternative supply of silk during the predominance of Palmyra. Indeed, the prominence which the Palmyrene trade appears to have in our period need be nothing more than an accident of our sources. There is really no way of knowing which, if either, of the two 'silk

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<sup>13</sup> J. Thorley "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at its Height", 71.

<sup>14</sup> M. Cary "Maes, Qui et Titianus" *CQ* n.s. 6 (1956), 130.

<sup>15</sup> Ptolemy *Geog.* I. 11. 6-7

routes', the overland or the maritime, was the most used and prosperous one, as our sources reveal absolutely nothing about the real volume of trade on these or any other routes. It would seem that both were in use in our period, and it is likely that the demand for the product at Rome was more than enough to sustain several routes of commerce, as indeed it seems to have done.

### *Hatra*

Another centre north of the Palmyrene route which appears to have had some importance was the city of Hatra. This Parthian vassal kingdom seems to have flourished in the second and third centuries A.D., as is witnessed by an impressive corpus of over three hundred Aramaic inscriptions found at the site. Situated in the desert between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at a perennial source of water, Hatra would have been on or near the Mesopotamian trade route described by Strabo,<sup>17</sup> and so may have benefited by trade using this route. There is, however, no evidence of urban development at Hatra until the beginning of the second century, so if Strabo's route did affect Hatra's development, it did so slowly. The inscriptions reveal that Hatra grew in importance in the interval between the expeditions of Trajan, when it was a relatively unimportant oasis town, and the expedition of Severus, by which time it was a major city.<sup>18</sup> Thus, even if the trade passing between the rivers had an effect on the eventual development of Hatra, this trade continued for some time before

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<sup>16</sup> M.G. Raschke "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 630.

<sup>17</sup> Strabo *Geog.* XVI. 1. 27

<sup>18</sup> H.J.W. Drijvers "Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa" *ANRW* II. 8 (1977), 819.

causing any such development, and thus cannot be adduced as the major reason for the city's rise.

Indeed, despite the fact that Hatra has been called a 'caravan city',<sup>19</sup> the evidence does not support this. On the contrary, it shows that Hatra seemed to derive its wealth not from the caravan trade but from its position as a religious centre, the regional centre for the worship of the Sun god. The vast majority of the inscriptions from Hatra are religious in nature, referring to dedications made to the gods of the city,<sup>20</sup> and in his account of the Severan sieges of the city Dio Cassius states that its wealth was derived from great numbers of rich offerings to the Sun god.<sup>21</sup> The common ascription of Hatra's prosperity to the caravan trade would thus appear not to be justified by the evidence; it would seem that the city's role as a religious centre was far more significant in its rise to wealth.

Nonetheless, there remains at least the possibility that Hatra had some role in the caravan trade. There exist some inscriptions from the city which mention relations with far-flung sites in the Tigris-Euphrates region; although they do not mention trade specifically, they indicate that the kingdom of Hatra maintained communications with some centres of trade and there thus may have been trade passing through Hatra. One such inscription mentions two locations, QRQBS and ḤSPS, identified as Qarqabes and Haspisa, two towns in the vicinity of Nisibis.<sup>22</sup> This would thus indicate that there existed communication between Hatra and the area of Nisibis, where, as we have seen, the caravan trade with the East was active. It is thus at least possible that Hatra

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<sup>19</sup> Rostovtzeff identified it as such in his *Caravan Cities*; see also M. A. Stein "The Ancient Trade Route past Hatra and its Roman Posts" *JRAS* (1941), 299-316.

<sup>20</sup> H. J. W. Drijvers "Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa", 815.

<sup>21</sup> Dio Cassius LXXVI. 12. 2

derived some trade from the overland silk route from central Asia, although clear evidence is lacking. If such trade did exist, it would presumably have been forwarded by Hatrene merchants along the track which linked Hatra with the Euphrates region in the region of Maskane, a route attested in another Hatrene inscription, although again without any specific reference to trade.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, we can only admit the possibility that Hatra was involved in the caravan trade, as there is no concrete evidence which unequivocally associates Hatra with the long distance commerce of the Roman Empire. Whatever role Hatra may have had in the commerce, it was undoubtedly disrupted by the rise of the Sassanid Empire, just as the commerce of Palmyra experienced similar difficulties for the same reason. Hatra's reaction to the Persian threat was to seek an alliance with Rome, as is attested by three Latin inscriptions mentioning the names of Roman auxiliary cohorts at Hatra.<sup>24</sup> In the end, however, this proved of no avail and Hatra fell to the Persians in about A.D. 240. Apparently, the city was destroyed and never again inhabited.

#### *From the Euphrates to the Mediterranean: the Trade in Roman Syria*

Whatever the nature of Hatra's participation in the caravan trade with the East, it is clear that there were other trade routes in use in Mesopotamia besides the Palmyrene route from the Gulf up the Euphrates and then across the desert to Palmyra. However, the way in which the goods were brought from the Euphrates

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<sup>22</sup> A. Caquot "Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra V" *Syria* 40 (1963), 12-14; J. Teixidor "Notes hatréennes 1: L'inscription de Sa'adiya" *Syria* 41 (1964), 273-279.

<sup>23</sup> J. Teixidor "Notes hatréennes 2: L'inscription de Hatra no. 79" *Syria* 41 (1964), 280-284.

<sup>24</sup> D. Oates "A Note on Three Latin Inscriptions from Hatra" *Sumer* 11 (1955), 39-43; A. Maricq "Classica et Orientalia 2: Les dernières années de Hatra: L'alliance romaine" *Syria* 34 (1957), 288-296.



crossing through Syria and thence to the markets of the Empire is not at all obvious. In areas such as the desert where there would have been little traffic beside the caravan trade present the commercial traffic is easier to trace, but when we get to the more inhabited parts of Roman Syria, the sheer volume of evidence of everyday life which exists for these areas tends to obscure the caravan traffic in eastern goods from beyond the Empire's borders. Nonetheless, there are a few indications which allow us to surmise at least what happened to the goods after they had reached the heart of the Syrian province.

Goods passing from both the Euphrates route and from the Palmyrene one may well have been brought through the city of Emesa, as several routes converge on this important city in the Orontes valley. Rostovtzeff thought that Emesa may have been another 'caravan city'<sup>25</sup>: while such a conclusion is probably excessive it remains possible that Emesa may have been involved in the forwarding of goods to the markets of the Empire. However it was that they crossed Roman Syria, the goods were probably eventually forwarded on to the great city of Antioch on the Orontes. In this place, the goods which had been brought there from both the Euphrates route and from Palmyra seem to have been subjected to the Roman 25% import duty imposed upon eastern imports, the *τετάρτη*. An inscription in the Palmyrene corpus, which has already been noted, mentions one Marcus Aemilius Asclepiades, a councillor of Antioch and a collector of the 25% tax (*τεταρτώνης*).<sup>26</sup> Presumably, therefore, Antioch was a collection point for this tax, and the goods were collected in a public warehouse there just as they were in Alexandria and the government's quarter-

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<sup>25</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff *Caravan Cities*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> *Inv.* X. 29. See IV. 1 above.

share was removed. Here also, presumably, the goods were sold either by the merchants who had brought them or by the government to further merchants who would then forward them by ship to Rome or to other points where such wares might be sold.<sup>27</sup>

It is probable that this process took place before any reprocessing was done, as it would seem foolish to spend time and effort respinning the raw silk only to have the government remove 25% of it. Far more likely is that the raw silk was brought directly to Antioch where the duty was extracted, and then it was sold to silk merchants who reprocessed it either in the east or further afield. Such reprocessing is attested in various cities of Roman Syria. A city that may have been involved in this trade is Edessa, which was possibly involved in the reprocessing of various goods, especially silk.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the types of reprocessing which have already been described in connection with Alexandria<sup>29</sup> were very probably carried on in cities of Syria as well, among which may have been Edessa. Certainly, from the literary references it would seem that the Phoenician city of Tyre continued to enjoy its ancient reputation as a place of cloth dyeing and manufacture.<sup>30</sup> It would be most surprising if this trade did not make use of the supply of silk being brought through both Palmyra and the Euphrates route.

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<sup>27</sup> For this procedure in Alexandria see II. 2 above.

<sup>28</sup> J.B. Segal *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford 1970), 44, 79, 137.

<sup>29</sup> See I. 4 & II. 2 above.

<sup>30</sup> Strabo *Geog.* XVI. 2. 23; Pliny *NH* V. 12

## *Conclusion*

Thus, it is quite clear that the eastern long-distance trade was present in Roman Syria, and may have had some effect on the local economy there, although such effect may have been limited and is in any case difficult to quantify. Nonetheless, the long distance trade is attested at Nisibis, Seleucia, Batnae and far into Central Asia, showing that there was an overland route which reached Mesopotamia from Central Asia. This route thus provided an alternative to the route dominated by the Palmyrenes. Simply because we lack spectacular ruins or an impressive corpus of evidence should not mean that we should discount the importance of the overland route. In the absence of any information from the ancient world about the volume of the eastern long-distance trade, we can have no way of knowing which route was in fact more important. Similarly, the common assumption that such places as Batnae and Nisibis only gained prominence after the destruction of Palmyra is unwarranted, and unsupported by the evidence. Ptolemy's account of the expedition of Maes Titianus shows that the northern routes were indeed active in the period prior to the fall of Palmyra.

The evidence for the long distance caravan trade of the Roman Empire is fragmentary at best, and in these northern regions it is more fragmentary than in most areas. Nonetheless, we can still salvage enough of the picture to know that there were merchants using the Euphrates route and the overland route into Central Asia at various times throughout the period of study, and thus more than likely this trade was carried on continuously through the entire period.

There is thus an important opportunity for the investigation of the political effects of this trade which should not be overlooked. When Rome made war upon its eastern neighbours, Parthia and then Sassanid Persia, the opposing armies often clashed in the area of Northern Mesopotamia and the Euphrates Valley, the very area through which this trade passed. Accordingly, many scholars have postulated that the trade routes were an important strategic consideration between the two powers, and may have even been the motive behind some of the military expeditions mounted by the warring parties. Indeed, given the frequency of conflict, the presence in this area of powers comparable in strength to Rome, and the presence of high value trade in the area, it would be in Northern Mesopotamia and the Euphrates Valley, if anywhere that we might expect to find the eastern long-distance trade having a pronounced effect on the foreign policy of Rome or Parthia/Persia. Whether or not this actually was the case, however, remains to be seen.

## **V.2 Trade Motives and Roman Relations with Parthia**

We have seen in the preceding section that there is sufficient evidence to show the existence of an overland trade crossing the Parthian Empire by which silk and other goods could be brought into Roman territory. The viability of these northern routes is, of course, entirely dependent upon sufficiently peaceful conditions which would allow the passage of goods along the trade routes. In this respect, the northern routes suffered from a serious liability: they crossed the territory of Rome's main rivals, Parthia and the Persian Sassanid state which succeeded it. In time of war, then, it is quite possible that the trade could be severely curtailed. It is also at least possible

that the exploitation of this trade could be used by the Parthians as some kind of economic lever against Rome, and that the Romans might consequently have the control of the trade routes and the trade thereon as one of their war aims in any campaign against the Parthians.

Among these military conflicts between Rome and its eastern neighbours, perhaps the most noticeable, and indeed the one to which trade is most commonly attributed as a primary motivation, is Trajan's expedition against Parthia in A.D. 114-117. Even more than with other episodes in the relationship between Rome and Parthia, many scholars have tried to place commercial motives at the forefront of the reasons for Trajan's war against Parthia.<sup>31</sup> These scholars assume that Trajan acted to destroy a Parthian trade monopoly on silk or other goods, or at least to remove any Parthian interference in the trade. While it is not proposed to provide a causation of Trajan's campaigns in the East in this thesis, the relevance, or lack of it, of the eastern luxury trade to his motivation must be examined. It should also be noted that the arguments raised in discussing Trajan's expedition will be pertinent to the other expeditions too, and so allow us to decide whether or not any of them might have been trade-related.

In the view of some, the attack upon Parthia is seen in the same light as the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom: as the removal of the Parthian intermediary in

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<sup>31</sup> Many scholars have made the assumption that the Parthians deliberately channelled and monopolised the trade with the East in order to increase their own revenues. See W.H. Schoff *The Parthian Stations of Isidore of Charax*, 18-19; E.H. Warmington *Commerce*, 20; J.I. Miller *Spice Trade*, 139, 235; J. Thorley "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at its Height", 75. From this point it has been postulated that Trajan wished to destroy the Parthian monopoly on the trade, and that this was therefore the major reason for his war on Parthia, for which see E.H. Warmington *Commerce*, 91-92; J.-P. Rey-Coquais "Syrie Romaine", 54; J.-P. Rey-Coquais "L'Arabie dans les routes de commerce", 235.

the same way as the annexation of Petra removed the Arabian intermediary.<sup>32</sup> The fallacy of this view with regard to the Nabataean kingdom has already been demonstrated, resting as it does on mistaken assumptions about the role of the Nabataeans in the trade, and it will soon be seen that the theory is equally untrue with respect to Trajan's Parthian expedition, or indeed any of the other attacks the Romans made against Parthia.

### *Parthian Participation in the Overland Trade*

The assumption is often made that, because luxury goods, and particularly silk, were transported across Parthian territory in order to reach the Mediterranean markets, the Parthians therefore exploited this opportunity and monopolised the trade. This view then gives rise to the idea of the 'Parthian intermediary' ruthlessly exploiting the trade and fixing prices, which in turn provides the cause for Roman attacks on Parthia. There is, however, very little evidence to support the idea of the Parthians monopolising the silk trade or exploiting it in any way other than the exaction of normal and expected municipal tolls and levies. The only literary references to an attempted Parthian monopoly are found in Chinese records. The *Hou Han shou*, or Annals of the Later Han Dynasty, record an incident in which Chinese ambassadors were dissuaded from travelling to Rome by the Parthians because they wished to monopolise the silk trade.<sup>33</sup> In this account it is related that while in the Arabian Gulf region in A.D. 97 the Chinese ambassador Kan Ying was told that the sea voyage to the Roman realm was too far, and was thus persuaded to abandon his

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<sup>32</sup> J.-P. Rey-Coquais "Syrie romaine", 54.

attempt to reach Roman lands. Scholars have generally assumed that the Parthians avoided mentioning the much shorter land route instead of the otherwise unattested sea route (which presumably would be around the Arabian peninsula) in order to keep the Chinese and Romans from coming into direct contact for the purposes of trade.<sup>34</sup>

In another reference, it is related that the Romans wished to send embassies to the Chinese but they were prevented from doing so by the Parthians who wished to keep the trade in Chinese silks to themselves.<sup>35</sup> While this clearly reflects Chinese perceptions of the situation, it will become apparent that there could in fact have been no real monopoly of the silk trade by the Parthians, certainly not of the exploitative type postulated by many. It must be remembered that there were many more difficulties on the road to China than the Parthians alone, and it may be that these, as much as any Parthian desire to exploit the silk trade, were the reasons that there was no contact between the Chinese and Roman governments. Even if the Romans had been able to send an embassy to the Chinese court, it is not likely, based on Roman dealings with other states, that trade would be high on the agenda. While the Chinese may well have thought in terms of trade, as their records seem to indicate, military matters would far more likely have been of interest to the Romans. It would hardly be surprising that the Parthians would wish to prevent any contact of *that* nature.

In any case, we *do* have an account of someone who was able to traverse Parthian lands along the overland route toward China, which indicates that there was no attempt by the Parthians to prevent contact between Roman subjects and the Chinese. In the previous section, the case of Maes Titianus was discussed. This

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<sup>33</sup> *HHS* 118. 5a

<sup>34</sup> J.I. Miller *Spice Trade*, 133-136.

Syrian merchant was able to travel, apparently unmolested by the Parthians, deep into Central Asia as far as a place known as the 'Stone Tower', unknown but certainly well past Parthian territory and approaching the area of Chinese influence.<sup>36</sup> It is quite clear from this that, whatever the Chinese perception of the situation may have been, the Parthians in fact made no attempt to prevent Maes from contacting the Chinese or other traders along the overland route.<sup>37</sup> If the Parthians had wished to prevent the Romans from obtaining direct access to Chinese silks, it is inconceivable that they would have allowed a Roman merchant such as Maes to pass directly through the middle of their realm. Evidently, there was free access for Roman merchants through the Parthian realm (at least in time of peace), and the idea of a Parthian monopoly on the trade in Chinese silk through their realm should be rejected.

Thus it is clear that if one wishes to assert the existence of a Parthian trade monopoly, one must both explain the episode of Maes Titianus, which has not been done, and be sure of the accuracy of the Chinese records and the identification of the place names contained therein.<sup>38</sup> Even if the accuracy of the Chinese records is generally accepted, however, the identification of Western place names and realms in these annals is still highly disputed, and it may well be that the whole episode concerning Kan Ying has been completely misinterpreted. Certainly the reference to a sea passage rather than the more normal overland journey raises many questions

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<sup>35</sup> *HHS* 88

<sup>36</sup> Ptolemy *Geog.* I. 11. 6-7

<sup>37</sup> This fact has caused some disquiet among scholars who hold to the view that the Parthians prevented any such contact between Romans and Chinese for the purposes of maintaining a trade monopoly. See J. Thorley "The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus", 214; J. Ferguson "China and Rome", 594, who both note that Maes' expedition seems to be anomalous. There is, of course, no anomaly when it is realised that there were no significant attempts by the Parthians to control or monopolise traffic over the overland route to Central Asia.

<sup>38</sup> See II. 1 above for these records.



which should be answered before this reference could even be considered as evidence of Parthian trade policy. Could, for instance, the officials to whom Kan Ying spoke, whoever they might have been, have reasonably expected to keep the existence of the land route secret in an area where Palmyrene merchants were active? In fact, the most likely place on the Gulf for Kan Ying to have been told this information would be in the Kingdom of Mesene, where Palmyrene merchants were very prominent and seem to have served in many official capacities under the Kings of Mesene.<sup>39</sup> These Palmyrenes would have been most eager to make commercial contacts with the Chinese, and so it would seem most unlikely that Kan Ying would have been misdirected in this way. Further, if indeed there was no other way of bringing in the silk except through Parthian territory, what difference could it have made if the Romans and Chinese *did* come into contact with one another? Why indeed, if the Parthians had sought to prevent Roman-Chinese contact, would they have taken Kan Ying as far as the Gulf before turning him back, rather than just block his passage as soon as he entered Parthian territory? All these points raise serious questions about the usefulness of these Chinese records with regard to Parthian trade policy. Even if, as Graf concludes, the Chinese annals provide a generally accurate picture of the political situation of the first century, there are enough inconsistencies and difficulties to make the possibility of a Parthian trade monopoly extremely problematical. When Ptolemy's account of Maes Titianus is taken into account, it would seem clear that any such monopoly was ephemeral if indeed it ever existed at all.

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<sup>39</sup> D.F. Graf "The Roman East from the Chinese Perspective", 206. See IV. 1 above.

### *The Impossibility of a Parthian Silk Monopoly*

There is in fact a great deal of evidence to show that there could have been no Parthian monopoly on silk, and consequently no coherent trade-based motive for Roman campaigns against Parthia. Firstly, there could have been no monopoly at all because silk was available by sea from India, to which it had presumably come from China. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* clearly refers to silk being available in Indian ports.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, there can have been no Parthian monopoly as long as there were other routes to import silk which did not cross Parthian territory at any point.<sup>41</sup> It would have been quite impossible for the Parthians to have fixed prices and controlled the trade as long as the silk could be obtained from elsewhere. Clearly the alleged Parthian monopoly on the silk trade can never in fact have existed, and if we reject the existence of such a monopoly, the supposed commercial motive for Trajan's expedition and other Roman wars against Parthia evaporates with it.

Indeed, if there had been any consistent attempt by the Parthians to exploit the caravan trade, let alone to monopolise it, it would be reasonable to expect that there would be extensive remains of such things as roads, bridges and caravanserais to channel and protect the caravan traffic. There is, however, very little archaeological evidence for the construction of such installations. There are, indeed, many remains of such constructions from the Sassanid period and later, reflecting the concern of those regimes with exploiting the caravan trade to the fullest possible extent, but none from the period under consideration.<sup>42</sup> It is true that Isidore of Charax in his *Parthian*

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<sup>40</sup> *Periplus* 39 (Barbarikon); 49 (Barygaza); 56 (Nelkynda); 64 (The Ganges region).

<sup>41</sup> M.G. Raschke "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 642.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 820-821.

*Stations* does refer on two occasions to a σταθμός βασιλικός,<sup>43</sup> but there is nothing to show that these are in fact government-built caravanserais: on the contrary, the adjective βασιλικός would seem to indicate that these stations were originally built for royal communications rather than for the use of merchants. The two stations, Alagma and Thillada Mirada, are situated on the Euphrates and the absence of other stations described as βασιλικός seems to show that these had once been stations on the Achaemenid royal road which Isidore included in his itinerary.<sup>44</sup> While merchants may certainly have made use of them, there is no evidence to show, and no reason to believe, that they were constructed by the Parthian government to encourage commerce. Thus, despite the common assertions to the contrary, there is no archaeological or literary evidence to suggest that the Parthians had any intention of exploiting the caravan trade passing through their territory.

One reason that gives good basis to doubt even the possibility of such exploitation is the fragmented nature of the Parthian state during most of the Roman Imperial period. During the first century the Parthians experienced bitter dynastic strife which was exacerbated and encouraged by the Roman support of pretenders.<sup>45</sup> In addition to, or perhaps because of, this strife, many dependent kingdoms and regions which formed part of the Parthian realm, such as Mesene, Elymais and Susa, were able to achieve a considerable measure of independence in this period.<sup>46</sup> As was discussed earlier, Mesene in particular, and to a lesser extent other realms, seem to have conducted their own relations with Rome independently of Parthian authority.

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<sup>43</sup> Isidore of Charax *Parthian Stations* 1

<sup>44</sup> M. Chaumont "La route royale des Parthes", 68.

<sup>45</sup> N.C. Debevoise *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago 1938), 143-178.

Once again, these facts demonstrate the great difficulty the Parthians would have experienced if they had tried to establish a monopoly over the trade coming through their borders.

### *Conclusion*

The notion of an exploitative monopoly by the Parthians over the trade passing through their territory is entirely speculative and is essentially devoid of supporting evidence. Even if the Parthians had the inclination and the capability to exclude the Romans from the trade and thus to raise the price of the commodities artificially, it would not have been possible to do so. There could have been no monopoly, as the *Periplus* makes it clear that silk could be obtained from Indian ports and shipped directly to Egypt, avoiding Parthian territory altogether. Thus, if the Parthians had attempted to raise the price of silk, Roman merchants would simply have sought their silk in Alexandria. If the possibility of a Parthian trade monopoly is removed, as it clearly must be, then the possibility of a commercial motivation for Rome's Parthian wars must also be removed. Even if Roman foreign policy was ever affected by mercantile interests, there is no apparent motive of this type in the case of Roman relations with the Parthian Empire. Once again, as was the case with the trade in Roman Arabia, the non-Roman 'middleman' is shown to be non-existent or at least substantially irrelevant, and thus any trade-based motive for Roman policy can be safely discarded.

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<sup>46</sup> For the case of Mesene see S.A. Nodelman "A Preliminary History of Characene", 83-121; G.W. Bowersock "La Mésène (Maisan) antonine", 159-168 and the discussion in IV. 1 above. For Susa and Elymais see G. Le Rider *Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes* (Paris 1965), 426-430.

Trajan's expedition, or any like it, cannot have been to 'remove the Parthian middleman' because, as we have seen, there *was* no Parthian middleman. Whatever the various motives for these expeditions were, and these motives lie well beyond the scope of this work but are not difficult to supply, we can be assured that they were not commercial ones. There may well, of course, have been collateral effects of these expeditions on the trade which passed through the Parthian Empire,<sup>47</sup> but that is not sufficient reason to adduce these effects as possible causes of the expeditions.

The relationship between Rome and Parthia was indeed a complex one, but the fact is that there is no place at which one is able to point out a coherent trade-based motive for either of the two regime's actions with respect to the other. Indeed, if trade had been a serious concern of Rome we might rather expect that they would maintain a peaceful policy, as the evidence from Palmyra would indicate that the trade was generally brought to a halt in time of war. The absence of the possibility of a Parthian trade monopoly, or indeed of any evidence that the Parthians tried to exploit the trade at all, shows clearly that the overland caravan trade did not feature to any real extent in the relationship between the two imperial powers of Rome and Parthia.

### V.3 Conclusion

Despite the clear lack of evidence for any significant Parthian participation in the trade, we may still legitimately conclude that there was a certain amount of trade which passed over the overland routes from Central Asia into Roman Syria, and also

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<sup>47</sup> Most noticeable is the apparent detachment of Mesene from Parthian dominance after Trajan's Parthian war, which enabled the Palmyrenes to establish a strong presence there and probably to

some trade which came up the length of the Euphrates from the Arabian Gulf and thence to Antioch or its region. The evidence for the existence of these routes, although scattered and limited, is nonetheless reasonably solid. As already stated, we can have no way of knowing the volumes of trade which passed upon these routes, but as has been seen in cities such as Petra and Palmyra, there is enough evidence to surmise that the trade acquired a certain significance in those places, and thus it may have done so in Roman Syria. Given the evidence already adduced that there was a proportion of the eastern 'luxury' trade which passed this way, the Roman cities of Syria and Palestine would presumably have seen a good deal of the merchandise of the eastern commerce passing through.

Nonetheless, in the more remote area of Roman Syria and Mesopotamia we have been able to discern clear evidence of the existence of the trade, and, as has been noted, we have no way of determining the relative volume of traffic which was carried upon these northern routes as compared to that which was carried through Palmyra or through Egypt. We might reasonably suppose, however, that the existence of such an obvious and ancient route such as that along the Euphrates would not have been overlooked by merchants, and that consequently this route would have received extensive use. Very probably this route would have become untenable during one of the frequent wars in the area, but even this may not have unduly affected the use of the route compared to other trade routes: after all, we have already noted that Palmyrene commerce also ground to a halt in time of war between Rome and Parthia or Persia. Although we are forced to a large extent to rely upon supposition, it would

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increase the volume of their trade (See IV. 1 above). This cannot of course be adduced as a reason for Trajan's expedition, as the bulk of the campaigning was well away from the area of Mesene.

seem most likely that the eastern trade involved traffic coming from the Gulf or from the overland 'Silk Road' and then up the valley of the Euphrates to Syria throughout the classical period of its existence.

One area of this trade that is clear, and reflects the conclusions drawn in other areas of this study, is that the Romans (or for that matter the Parthians) were never sufficiently interested in the eastern long-distance trade to allow it to dictate their foreign policy in any way. No doubt, just as in Egypt and probably in the other areas that were traversed by this commerce, the Romans were happy to collect the 25% tax and other duties, and might have even taken steps to protect them, but as a foreign policy imperative the trade was not a consideration. As has been shown, all the evidence which is from time to time put forward to show that Romans or Parthians were motivated by the interests of the trade in the formulation of their foreign policy in fact teaches nothing of the sort. There is no compelling evidence whatever to believe that Trajan's Parthian war, or indeed any of the other Roman or Parthian military adventures in the area, were ever motivated by the interests of the eastern long-distance commerce.

While it is thus difficult to draw conclusions about the nature or the significance of the trade in Syria to the extent that is possible elsewhere, this may be accounted for by the fact that it is more submerged in other activity in these northern regions than it is elsewhere; it may also mean that the economic significance of the trade in this area was rather less than in an area such as Palmyra where the trade stood out more because of the lack of other activity. Such conclusions, however, must only remain conjecture. In an area of study where the waters are often muddy and the

evidence often scattered and inconclusive, we must concede that in the study of the trade in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia this is particularly true.



## **VI. THE LONG DISTANCE TRADE AND THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT**

In the course of this study, it has repeatedly been found that the Roman government did not allow its foreign policy imperatives to be deflected by the needs of the eastern long-distance trade. Indeed, the only policy which the government can consistently be found to have held with respect to this commerce was one of extracting as much tax money as possible from it. No act of Roman policy in the east need necessarily be assigned to the requirements of the trade, and none of the public works which were constructed for the trade, such as the roads and ports in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, can be attributed to any other policy motive than the desire to collect taxes.

Despite this, there are some indications in Roman literature that concern was expressed about the amount of money that was being 'wasted' on eastern goods, or about the way in which the trade enriched potential enemies of the empire even as it impoverished the empire itself. These concerns would appear to stand in opposition to the general argument of this thesis, that the Romans (by their actions at least) had no real concern about the eastern long-distance trade, and were only interested in it as a potential source of tax revenue. Indeed, these very concerns have from time to time been used as a basis to support views of an active Roman interest in the trade. Several scholars have argued that a Roman desire to reduce the outflow of coin expended in trade lay behind their alleged "economic policies" by which they strove to remove

“middlemen” from the commerce and attempted to concentrate the trade in Roman hands.<sup>1</sup>

Although it has already been shown in this work that no such policies were ever put into practice, it will still be necessary to explain these apparent concerns expressed by Roman writers. Was there a real Roman concern about an outflow of coin to lands beyond the empire, and was such a concern justified? What other factors can possibly have affected, or perhaps even counterbalanced, the Roman government’s attitude to the trade?

## **VI.1 The Balance of Payments**

It has often been noted that the eastern trade must have cost a significant amount of money, and it has been suggested that the outflow of coin to pay for these ‘luxuries’ was, or should have been, an area of grave concern for the imperial government. In the introduction, it was noted that the goods imported in this commerce were indeed expensive, and presumably at least a proportion of the costs of these items must have gone to the lands beyond the empire from which the goods came. Thus, there certainly would have been, at least to some extent, an outflow of coin involved in the trade, as indeed the Indian coin hoards already discussed demonstrate. It is equally certain, as has been mentioned in the introduction, that the Romans were aware of this and occasionally complained about it. Were these complaints therefore justified, and what *was* in fact the damage being done to the Empire by the loss of coin to Persia, Arabia and India?

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<sup>1</sup> For these arguments see I. 1 above.

### *Roman Complaints about the Cost of the Trade*

The Roman writers Pliny and Tacitus provide us with our best and most commonly cited examples of Roman concern about the amount of money being lost in the eastern commerce. Tacitus, for example, described a ruling by Tiberius on the prevalence of luxurious living in his day, in which he mentioned

. . .illa feminarum propria, quis lapidum causa pecuniae nostrae ad externas aut hostilis gentis transferuntur?

. . .that particular (luxury) of women, for which for the sake of jewels our wealth is transferred to foreign or hostile countries?<sup>2</sup>

This statement, as will be seen, has been often taken along with other similar references as proof of an imperial concern over the amount of money that was being lost in foreign trade. Similarly, Pliny mentioned on two occasions the volume of money which was being expended in the eastern trade, and this too is often taken to be proof of opposition to the trade from within the Roman government due to concern about the drain of money. In the first instance, Pliny noted that India absorbed more than fifty million sesterii per year paid for trade goods:

digna res, nullo anno minus HS |  $\overline{D}$  | imperii nostri exhauriente India et merces remittente quae apud nos centiplicato ueneant.

It is an important matter, since India in no year drains less than 50 million sesterii from our empire and returns goods which are sold among us at one hundred times the cost.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tacitus *Annales* III. 53

<sup>3</sup> Pliny *NH* VI. 26

In the other reference, Pliny gives a different figure, this time totalling the amount spent on trade goods in all of Rome's eastern commerce as opposed to only that which was sent to India:

minimaque computatione miliens centena milia sestertium annis omnibus India et Seres et paeninsula illa imperio nostro adimunt - tanti nobis deliciae et feminae constant

And by the smallest computation India, China and that peninsula (i.e. Arabia) take one hundred million sestertii from our empire every year - so much do our luxuries and our women cost us<sup>4</sup>

As has already been noted, the figures which Pliny actually quotes do not give us any real basis for calculating the volume of the eastern trade in this period, as the complaints are probably more Stoic moralising than actual usable trade statistics. However, for the purposes which we have at the moment, these quotations are useful, for they *do* reveal at least a professed concern among the Roman upper classes about the volume of silver coin which was being sent to India and other places in the eastern commerce.

Thus, despite the imprecision of Pliny's figures, there would still seem to be reasonable evidence that some elements in Rome, perhaps even the emperor himself, were seriously concerned about the drain of finance caused by the eastern trade. Indeed, as has already been noted, these statements have been extensively used by a variety of scholars to uphold views of a proactive Roman trade policy. In order to do this, it is argued that the Romans desired to stem this outflow of coin to lands outside the empire, and to accomplish this they instituted policies to remove the "middlemen" from the commerce, and to concentrate more of the trade into Roman hands. While it

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<sup>4</sup> Pliny *NH* XII. 41

has already been shown that these theories are false, and that there was no discernible Roman policy aimed at modifying the eastern commerce in any way,<sup>5</sup> the relationship of these facts with the concerns expressed by Pliny and Tacitus needs to be clarified. If such concerns *were* apparent in Roman thought of the imperial period, why do we not then find these concerns acted upon in the field of policy? In short, if the emperors really were concerned about the outflow of coin to India and elsewhere, why do they appear to have done nothing about it?

*Was there an "Adverse Balance of Trade" in the Eastern Commerce?*

When the evidence is examined, it will in fact be found that the Romans do not appear to have had much to worry about concerning any outflow of coin arising from the eastern trade. Moreover, given the absence of any attempt to alter the patterns of trade or to reduce the outflow of coin, it would seem that the Romans were aware that there was no reason for concern. The concerns expressed by Pliny and Tacitus would thus appear to be somewhat anomalous: why do they make such complaints if all the evidence suggests that there was only a limited outflow of coin, and that if the evidence from the Egyptian Eastern Desert is anything to go by, the Roman government actually encouraged the eastern commerce? Before this is answered, however, it will first be necessary to see what the evidence is concerning the actual outflow of coin in payment for eastern goods.

The first thing which should be noted is that by no means all of the commerce was conducted in coin. In fact, it would appear from the evidence contained in the

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<sup>5</sup> See II. 4; III. 2, 4; V. 2 above.

*Periplus Maris Erythraei* that a substantial proportion of the eastern commerce was conducted on an exchange system, or at least that Egyptian export goods were sold in the ports of India and Arabia and then the funds from these sales were used to purchase the items of eastern merchandise for the return trip to Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Judging by the account of the trade as given in the *Periplus*, the 'balance of trade' problem does not appear to have been as serious as some have suggested. While it is certainly true that some areas, especially Southern India, expected payment in cash or bullion, a large proportion of the trade would nonetheless have been paid for by the export of goods from Egypt, as well as wines, metals and other items from various areas of the Empire.

It also must be borne in mind that a great deal of the funds expended on the items of the eastern trade would have remained inside the Empire, in the hands of merchants, manufacturers, reprocessors and indeed the government itself. In the introduction, the importance of the reprocessing trade was emphasised, and it was shown that the value of items offered for final sale to the public was often much greater than that of the raw goods imported from the east.<sup>7</sup> This is very important, for it means that the bulk of the money expended on the purchase of luxury goods in Rome and in other markets did *not* go to 'middlemen' and merchants outside the empire: instead, it remained in the hands of Roman subjects. Added to the proportion of the price kept by reprocessors, the merchants and shipmasters themselves who conveyed the goods to the empire would have absorbed a significant portion of the

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<sup>6</sup> L. Casson *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 29-31. Such financial transactions may well have been made in Roman *denarii* as opposed to local currency, as the superior fineness and uniformity of Roman coins probably made them the preferred trade coin (See K. Harl *Coinage in the Roman Economy*, 298-307).

final sale price. In addition, as will be seen in the next section, the revenue accruing to the government from each sale was also likely to be substantial.

Thus, it would appear that the vast bulk of the amount actually paid in cash at Rome and elsewhere in the Empire for the items of the eastern trade in fact never left the Roman empire. As has already been pointed out, the vast majority of 'middlemen' in the trade were in fact Romans,<sup>8</sup> so therefore the money which Tiberius complained Rome's women were wasting on jewellery for the most part remained in Roman hands: indeed a good part of it must have ended up as imperial revenue in one form or another, as will be discussed in the following section. Accordingly, we can find little real support for the apparent concern about currency drain found in Pliny and Tacitus here, as much of the amount which they said was being spent on foreign luxuries must have remained within the empire.

Nonetheless, there was at least some drain of coinage, as the *Periplus* is clear that the major commodity required to purchase the pepper of Muziris and Nelkynda in Southern India was coin, and this is amply confirmed by the presence of Roman coin hoards in the area. However, even in this case some perspective is in order: the coin hoards which have been found in Dacia and Germany are considerably larger than any found in India, so it would seem reasonable that the money which was being sent to the tribes of these areas in subsidies was at least as much a drain on finance as was the eastern trade.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while the silver and gold lost to India may have contributed to some extent to the financial crisis in which the Empire found itself in the third

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<sup>7</sup> I. 4 above.

<sup>8</sup> M.G. Raschke "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 643 and III. 2; V. 2 above.

<sup>9</sup> C. Howgego "The Supply and Use of Money in the Roman World" *JRS* 82 (1992), 5; K. Harl *Coinage in the Roman Economy*, 309-312.

century, the contribution to the situation made by the subsidies paid to Germanic and Dacian chieftains so that they would not invade the Empire was much greater.<sup>10</sup>

Another factor which must be taken into consideration is that many of the coins which were removed from the Empire in the course of trade would have eventually found their way back in. This effect would have occurred due to the superior fineness and recognition which Roman coins enjoyed. Thus, anyone from outside the Empire who wished to do business within it would have to first obtain Roman coins in order to do so. In this way, there would have been a steady return flow of coins along the arteries of trade leading from the East into the Empire.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while we must acknowledge that some coin was lost in the course of the eastern trade, we must also recognise that it was not as severe as might have been thought. Indeed, even if it had been a serious problem, it would seem that the Romans did not understand the fact, or at least did not care to do anything about it. On the contrary, as we have already seen throughout this study, the Romans built roads, caravan stations and ports in the Eastern Desert of Egypt and provided military protection for the caravans: actions which, it would seem, were designed to encourage the commerce with the east, not discourage it.

Thus, there would appear to be something of a contradiction between professed Roman concerns about the trade, the actual situation regarding the loss of coinage, and the actions which the Romans took with regard to the commerce. Despite the fact that the Romans complained about the loss of coin, it would seem that such a loss was in fact fairly minimal, and moreover it would appear that the Romans were

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<sup>10</sup> C. Howgego "The Supply and Use of Money in the Roman World", 8.

<sup>11</sup> K. Harl *Coinage in the Roman Economy*, 313-314.



aware of this: this is at least what would seem to be implied in their lack of action to stop the outflow. The question then must now be asked: if the Romans were not really concerned about the loss of gold and silver bullion to areas outside the empire, and indeed had no real reason to be concerned, why then were such pronouncements of concern about the loss of currency made?

### *Roman Moralism and the Eastern Commerce*

One notable fact about the pronouncements made by Tiberius (in Tacitus) and Pliny is that the remarks appear in the general context of complaining about luxurious living, and that women in particular are singled out as particularly culpable in this regard. In the Tacitus reference, for instance, Tiberius had been remarking upon a contemporary taste for all things luxurious, not just the goods of the eastern trade. Thus, the context of his comment is not that of fiscal concern but of condemning *luxuria*, and it is in this context that the statement must be understood. Similarly the remarks of Pliny can be understood in the same light: he was not complaining about financial problems of the Empire; rather, he was moralising about the great cost to the Empire of the *luxuria* of many of its citizens..

Similar sentiments are found in other areas of Roman literature. While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from such source material, it is nonetheless among the works of the Latin elegists like Propertius and Ovid that references to eastern luxury goods are particularly common, and it is among these poets that the link between these goods and *luxuria* is most clearly established. A dominant strain in these references is that luxury-loving women are especially fond of these items,

although this strain is not confined to the elegists, as has already been seen in the Pliny and Tacitus references quoted above. This association of *luxuria* and the desire for jewels and other such goods with women in particular is seen in the following lines from the *Ars Amatoria* of Ovid:

Vos quoque non caris aures onerate lapillis,  
Quos legit in uiridi decolor Indus aqua

You also do not burden your ears with stones  
Which the dark Indian gathers from the green water<sup>12</sup>

In this particular instance, Ovid's *praeceptor amoris* describes the supposed taste of women for such gemstones and claims to eschew it. Thus he adopts a pose of opposition to the excessive use of luxury goods, but at the same time is implying that women were very attached to such things. Of course, the stance Ovid takes on any given subject in his poems will depend entirely upon the particular 'pose' he has taken as narrator in that poem. Thus, we are not surprised to find a different attitude to expensive eastern items taken in other references. In one such case, for example, Ovid advises women to use a makeup which had frankincense and myrrh as important ingredients.<sup>13</sup> However, despite this, it would appear that the dominant strain in Roman literature, from both historians and elegists, is that the vice of *luxuria*, and the eastern goods which catered to that vice, were especially associated with women and, by implication, effeminacy in men.

Throughout virtually the entirety of Roman literature of the Republic and Principate, the exaltation of the *mos maiorum* and the severe, self-controlled heroes of Rome's mythical past was paramount. We see this reflected in Roman poetry, in

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<sup>12</sup> Ovid *Ars Amatoria* III. 129-130

<sup>13</sup> Ovid *De Medicamine Faciei* 88-94

speeches in the courts and in the succession of sumptuary laws which were enacted at various times through the years. In all these cases, the effeminate, adulterous and luxurious behaviour of the “current generation” is contrasted with the upright behaviour of the heroes of older times.<sup>14</sup> The association of the vice of *luxuria* with women, and therefore by implication with *mollitia*, or effeminacy, should be seen in the same light as other Roman moralistic writings which exalt “traditional” Roman values over the behaviour of contemporary Romans. Accusations of *mollitia* in various Roman sources are often characterised by associations of the victim with the use of items of the eastern trade, such as silk or perfumes.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the complaints of Pliny and Tacitus about the eastern trade, which have been noted, should be understood in the same way: they are far more typical laments about the contemporary taste for *luxuria*, associated here as elsewhere with the use of eastern goods, than they are complaints about a financial problem.

Thus, it is clear that those statements in Roman literature which have sometimes been taken as indicative of a concern about currency drain are in fact no such thing. Instead, it is apparent that these comments are far more about opposition to the ‘vice’ of *luxuria*, which was seen as effeminate and ‘un-Roman’. There was accordingly no attempt to stop the drain of currency to the east because, as we have seen, such a currency drain was far less serious than has been thought; moreover, the Roman statements which have often been taken as proof of such concern have been shown to be something entirely different. We are, however, still left with a question: why did the Romans still do nothing to try to affect the incoming trade, given that

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<sup>14</sup> D. Earl *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome* (London 1967), 30-32; C. Edwards *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1993), 20-32.

they appear to have associated its goods with *luxuria*, a vice which they felt was destructive to their Empire?

The reason appears to lie in the difference between Roman public pronouncements and actual policy. The pronouncements of Pliny and Tacitus, as has been seen, should be understood as a reflection of typical Roman morality; as the rejection of 'luxurious' contemporary behaviour in favour of the *mos maiorum*. Similar concerns are expressed in the long series of sumptuary laws which were enacted throughout the Republic and the Empire. It is noteworthy, however, that these laws were enacted again and again, yet invariably seem to have been passed over and openly ignored within a very short time of their enactment. It would seem that the emperors, in their enactment of sumptuary laws and such like, were striving more for the *appearance* of opposing *luxuria* and other vices than they were striving to actually put a stop to it. The very fact that the emperors allowed the eastern commerce to continue unimpaired throughout all this period would seem to be adequate proof that these sumptuary laws, not to mention the pronouncements of Tiberius as recorded by Tacitus and the complaints of Pliny, should be seen as designed only for consumption by the public and the upper classes in Rome. They reflect the desire of the Emperor, and of upper class Romans in general, to conform to what was expected of Roman morality and behaviour; they cannot be taken as any guide to the Roman government's attitude to the long-distance eastern commerce.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 68-69. See e.g. Pliny *NH* XIII. 18-25.

## Conclusion

It thus seems that the Roman government had little reason to be concerned about the eastern long-distance trade, and indeed there does not seem to be any real evidence of such a concern. Those concerns which we do find expressed in Roman literature of one sort or another do not in fact show a desire to reduce the amount of precious metal leaving the state, as has sometimes been claimed. Instead, it has been shown that these statements are primarily of a moralistic nature: they profess to be concerned about the vices of *luxuria* and *mollitia*, closely associated in the Roman mind. Moreover, it would appear that even this was more for the sake of appearance rather than it actually indicating anything the Roman government intended to act upon. Public statements like this, like sumptuary laws, were primarily for public consumption: they reflected what the Roman Emperor was expected to do, and the values that a true Roman was expected to have. There is absolutely no indication that such sentiments would have been carried any further than this, or that any attempt would have been made to stop the eastern commerce.

Against these statements, of course, is the evidence of the facilities built for the trade in Egypt and elsewhere. If one wished to take the complaints about the trade voiced by Tacitus and Pliny seriously these would seem to be an inexplicable contradiction: why would the Roman government oppose the conduct of the trade on the one hand but then provide merchants with roads, facilities and protection on the other? However, when we understand these complaints in the way that has been outlined above, the contradiction becomes more understandable. Having provided the Roman public with the pronouncements on morality that were expected of an

Emperor, the government could then turn with a will to the collection of the lucrative taxes which were collected from the eastern commerce.

## **VI.2 The Extent of State Revenues from the Trade**

In this entire study, the main motive which has been demonstrated to have affected the Romans' response to the Eastern commerce has been the lucrative tax revenues which could be gleaned from the traffic. In all areas where the commerce was active, no conclusive evidence could be found that the Romans had any sort of proactive economic policy. In addition, it has also been noted that there is no conclusive evidence for any major direct imperial involvement in the Egyptian Red Sea trade, or indeed in any other aspect of the eastern commerce.<sup>16</sup>

We have already seen in the discussion of the trade in Egypt that we are left with the tax revenue accruing to the government from the trade as the only significant reason to account for the construction of facilities and the provision of protection to the traders involved in the commerce. However, to account for such interest and expenditure the amount of income that the government gleaned from the commerce must have been considerable. Can we therefore gain any insight into the importance that this tax income represented to the imperial government? It will be the purpose of this section to attempt to enumerate the sources of income which the eastern commerce provided to the imperial government, and then to gain some idea of the relative place of this income in the overall tax base upon which the government drew.

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<sup>16</sup> II. 3 above.

### *Sources of Imperial Income in the Eastern Trade*

In this survey of the Romans' eastern trade, several instances have been noted in which traders were compelled to pay duties of one sort or another to government officials. Although the majority of the evidence for these sources of income come from Egypt, this is in all probability a matter of survival of sources, and it is not unreasonable to assume that similar charges applied in other areas of the commerce.

The most significant source of tax income from the eastern trade would have been the *τετάρτη*, the 25% tax which appears to have been levied on the goods being brought into the empire. As has already been noted, this tax was levied at Alexandria and (probably) Antioch, as well as at the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome, although this may have been an exceptional case designed to ensure that no Red Sea shipmasters circumvented the payment of the *τετάρτη* by landing their goods in Leuke Kome instead of at Berenike or Myos Hormos.<sup>17</sup> The positioning of the main collection points at Alexandria and Antioch would, however, seem to imply that all commerce coming through the east was expected to pass through these points and pay their duty there. Indeed, as has been pointed out in the section on the Egyptian Red Sea trade, part of the purpose of the soldiers guarding the trade routes in the desert may have been to ensure that the merchants did not attempt to sell their goods before the *τετάρτη* was paid in Alexandria.

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<sup>17</sup> See II. 2, 4; III. 1; V. 1 above. For the special significance of the tax-collector at Leuke Kome see M.G. Raschke "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 664; G.K. Young "The Customs Collector at the Nabataean Port of Leuke Kome"; and III. 1 above.

The sources which we have on the *τετάρτη* nowhere reveal the exact commodities which were taxed. It has been generally assumed that all the goods of the eastern long-distance trade were subject to this impost, but this may not in fact be the case. As was noted in the introduction, the general category of "luxury goods" should not necessarily be applied to all the goods of the eastern trade. Such items as myrrh and frankincense were chiefly used for religious and funerary purposes, and would not have been considered as luxury goods by the Romans.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that such goods as these, for example, would not have been subject to the full 25% tax.

This may be supported by the presence of the customs collector at Leuke Kome. If this officer was indeed a Roman one placed to prevent the evasion of the *τετάρτη* by ships offloading at Leuke Kome instead of Berenike or Myos Hormos, as has been previously surmised,<sup>19</sup> we might ask why was it necessary to place a tax collector there to effect this if there was already a collector of the *τετάρτη* at Gaza to collect the tolls on the incense being brought there from Southern Arabia via Petra? Pliny indeed mentions the collection of Roman tolls at Gaza from caravans which were bringing frankincense from Southern Arabia,<sup>20</sup> and any goods being brought from Leuke Kome into the Roman Empire would have to pass over the Petra-Gaza road; one would have presumed that the collector of the *τετάρτη* at Gaza would then have charged the impost. Why then would there have been a collector of the *τετάρτη* at Leuke Kome as well?

A possible answer is that the customs collectors at Gaza mentioned by Pliny may not have been collecting the *τετάρτη* at all. In fact, Pliny does not specify which

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<sup>18</sup> I. 4 above.

<sup>19</sup> See III. 1 above.



tax it was that they were collecting: it may very well have been some other form of *portorium*. If this is the case, and this would appear to be the only reason that it would have been necessary to place a customs-collector at Leuke Kome, then it means that the Arabian incenses which had been brought from southern Arabia into the Empire in fact never paid the *τετάρτη*. It would then seem at least possible that only goods which were imported into the Empire from India and further afield might have been subject to the 25% tax. It might also be added that a rescript of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus preserved in Justinian's *Digest*, the so-called "Alexandrian Tariff", lists those goods which were subject to *uctigal*, probably at Alexandria: myrrh is listed, but frankincense is not.<sup>21</sup> We should, of course realise that nowhere is it stated in the rescript that the *τετάρτη*, or indeed the *uctigal Maris Rubri* mentioned by Pliny in his account of the Roman discovery of Taprobanê, is meant; the tariff could be yet another tax levied on these imported goods. The rate of taxation is not given, so it is impossible to tell.

Nonetheless, the *τετάρτη* must have represented a significant source of income for the imperial government. It was, however, certainly not the only way in which the eastern trade was made to contribute to the imperial coffers. For example, as has been seen in the examination of the Egyptian Red Sea trade earlier in this work, there were several different taxes which had to be paid to convey goods from the Red Sea ports to Alexandria.<sup>22</sup> *P. Vindob.* G 40822 mentions some of these: upon arrival at one of the Red Sea ports, the *arabarchs* removed some goods; the rate of taxation here seems to have varied from nil to about 3%, although higher rates may of course

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<sup>20</sup> Pliny *NH* XII. 32

<sup>21</sup> *Dig.* XXXIX. 4. 16. 7

have been charged for goods not mentioned in the papyrus. After transportation across the Eastern Desert, the goods were then impounded in the public customs-house at Coptos until some other taxes which are not specified were paid. These taxes may or may not have been the same as the so-called Coptos tariff, which was paid to the *arabarch* to purchase passes to travel the roads of the Eastern Desert: in this case, the taxes seem to have been paid for each person and pack animal in the group, regardless of what was being carried. After this, the goods could be conveyed to Alexandria where the *τετάρτη* was imposed. On the way down the Nile, however, the goods would presumably have been subject to the normal *portoria* imposed on all goods making this journey, whether from inside Egypt or from outside.<sup>23</sup> Added to this would then have been market duties at the point of sale and *portoria* at other ports through which the goods passed prior to their final sale. Although the evidence from other areas of the commerce is nowhere near as comprehensive as that coming from Egypt, we may confidently expect that the taxes extracted from the eastern trade in those areas were of the same order as those extracted from Egypt.

Thus, it would seem that there was a wide variety of taxes and duties which were extracted from the eastern commerce. While some of these, such as local market duties, may have gone into the treasuries of local officials, it would seem that the bulk of them, especially the lucrative *τετάρτη*, were paid into the imperial coffers. It is, of course, quite impossible to calculate what this income would actually have been, given that we do not know what the actual volume of the trade was. However, it may be

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<sup>22</sup> See II. 2 above.

<sup>23</sup> For the *portoria* levied upon goods being conveyed within Roman Egypt see S.J. de Laet *Portorium*, 297-330; A.C. Johnson "Roman Egypt", 590-609; S.L. Wallace *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian*, 255-276; 460-470.

possible to gain some idea of the order of this income compared to other sources, and so determine something of the possible significance of the trade to the imperial government.

### *The Significance of the Tax Income to the Imperial Government*

It is clear that there was a variety of ways by which the Roman government obtained income from the eastern commerce. In any attempt to determine how significant this income was to the government, however, we are affected by the same factors that prevent any accurate assessment of the volume of the trade itself. There are no actual records, and any figures we possess are of very limited value. At most, the best we can expect to achieve is to gain some insight into the relative place of eastern customs duties in the tax base of the Roman Empire.

The only way, however, by which we might hope to gain some insight into the income generated by the *τετάρτη* is by the use of Pliny's trade figures. As has already been discussed, this is an endeavour which is filled with peril. If, however, we assume that Pliny used imperial customs receipts or something similar to arrive at his total trade figure of 100 million *sestertii*, there could be some basis for a calculation. This would, assuming that all the goods of which Pliny spoke were subject to the *τετάρτη*, yield a figure of 25 million *sestertii* per year in the Flavian period. We must, however, admit the possibility that this figure could be completely misleading, just as Pliny's figures with respect to the volume of the eastern trade in general cannot be used to provide any useful conclusions. If, for example, Pliny did not use the value of the goods when the 25% tax was calculated but the actual retail value at Rome after

the goods had been reprocessed, the amount gleaned by the *τετάρτη* would be significantly less. On the other hand, if Pliny was only describing the amount of cash which was being spent and not taking into account those goods which had been purchased in barter transactions, the figure for the *τετάρτη* would be considerably larger. Thus, the figure could perhaps be anything from 10 million *sestertii* to maybe 50 million, and that is only if we assume that Pliny's figures were approximately accurate, which is by no means certain.

Nonetheless, we now have a figure which we might compare with what we know of the tax income of the Empire in the early Principate. Suetonius, for example, stated that the tribute paid by all three Gallic provinces after Caesar's conquest of Gaul was 40 million *sestertii*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, an income from the *τετάρτη* in the Flavian period of between 10 and 50 million is clearly not an inconsiderable sum: we might thus reasonably expect that the Roman government would take steps to ensure that this income continued to flow. Thus, even though we should rightly be extremely cautious of any totals derived from Pliny's trade figures, we can probably say that we can know something of the order of imperial income gleaned from the eastern trade, and that that order was not insignificant.<sup>25</sup>

This significance is indeed reflected in the facilities which were provided by the Roman government for the protection and monitoring of the trade. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the Roman government appears to have built ports,

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<sup>24</sup> Suetonius *Diu. Iul.* 25

<sup>25</sup> It is regrettable that no more accurate comparison is possible to determine the scale of income from these duties. For example, the Gross National Product of the Roman Empire, which would be perhaps the most obvious comparison, is impossible to determine given the paucity of our data. Thus, to say that the income derived from the duties levied upon long-distance international trade was probably roughly equivalent to the direct tax income from a reasonably wealthy province is as far as we can legitimately go in describing the scale of the indirect tax income from the long-distance commerce.

roads and customs-houses for the traffic and equipped the roads with military protection. Many alternative explanations for these facilities, such as that they were provided because the Emperor himself directly profited from the trade, or that the encouragement of the trade in Egypt was designed as a foreign policy move to weaken Arabian kingdoms such as those of the Sabaeans and the Nabataeans, have been examined and shown to be false. The sole reason which can be adduced for the presence of these facilities is that they were designed to protect the trade as a valuable source of imperial income. This seems to be in full accord with the order of income from the trade which was suggested in the previous paragraph. Conversely, given the absence of any satisfactory explanation for the construction of these facilities other than to protect tax income, their very presence appears to be a strong argument that the income generated by the trade was of great significance to the imperial government.

Thus, even though there are no reliable figures which might allow us to determine the extent of government revenues from the eastern trade, it has been seen that these revenues were nonetheless of some significance. It is, therefore, possible that they were comparable to the tributes gained from an important province such as Gaul: thus, the government would attach some importance to such a source of income. This then would adequately explain the facilities which were provided by the government for the trade in Egypt and elsewhere.

### VI.3 Conclusion: The Imperial Government's Attitude Toward the Trade

Throughout the course of this thesis we have noted the factors which may have influenced the attitude of the Roman government to the eastern long-distance trade, as well as other evidence, such as the extensive military works associated with protecting the caravans, which may allow us to reconstruct the imperial attitude towards this commerce. Numerous factors could be, and indeed have been, put forward by various scholars from time to time as possible influences on the Roman attitude to the trade. On the one hand, there is the possible drain of financial resources coupled with the moralistic concern about the effect of these luxury goods on the Roman state; on the other, the possibility of real financial gain, possibly to the Emperor himself as a result of the activities of his agents, and certainly to the state through the collection of taxes and other dues. Assuming all these influences are valid, it would certainly seem to be a legitimate question to ask whether or not we can detect a coherent attitude to the trade from the Imperial government through the period under consideration.

When all of these possible factors are examined, however, many of them do not appear to have really been as important as has often been suggested. The supposed drain of Roman finance to the east has been shown to be largely ephemeral; even if it was significant the Romans do not appear to have been unduly concerned by it. Even a moralistic interest in the bad effects of *luxuria* upon the empire's citizenry, which is a far more plausible reason for the Roman complaints about loss of money to the East than is any worry about the 'balance of trade', has been seen to be merely a form of posturing. There is simply no evidence at all to show that the Romans had

any real concern about the eastern trade: certainly they had none upon which they wished to act.

Similarly, in the field of foreign policy, we have seen throughout the course of this thesis that the Romans undertook no policy moves which can be convincingly assigned to economic motives. Indeed, it is quite apparent that the needs of the trade were not a concern either positively or negatively when it came to Roman policy in the east, as will be summarised in the next chapter. What then *does* remain that would enable us to determine the attitude of the imperial government to the eastern trade?

The only evidence for an 'imperial attitude to the trade' which can in any way be considered is the expense to which the government was prepared to go to protect (and perhaps monitor) the commerce in Egypt and Syria, and the taxes which they collected from it. In the course of this investigation it has been shown that the public works constructed by the Romans, especially in Egypt but also in other places, were designed purely to protect a lucrative source of tax revenue: indeed, as is the case with Palmyra, when local authorities were willing and able to take on the burden of protecting the commerce, the Romans were quite willing to let them do so. The Romans guarded the caravans because the caravans were a substantial source of tax income for the empire; there is no other reason which has any basis in fact by which we might explain their interest in the protection of the caravan routes in the Eastern Desert of Egypt and elsewhere.

Thus, the only 'attitude' which the Roman imperial government can be realistically said to have had towards the eastern commerce was that it was a lucrative source of revenue. All the theories about Roman interest in removing 'middlemen', or

reducing the outflow of coinage, or indeed of entertaining any kind of proactive policy toward the commerce have been found wanting for a lack of hard evidence. They must, therefore, be discarded. Instead, we must replace these theories with a picture in which the Romans allowed the trade itself to develop in whatever way it would, and did not trouble themselves to attempt to modify the trade in any way. The only thing that the Romans were concerned about with regard to the trade was that it could be a source of considerable income: even this idea they probably got from the Ptolemies, who had been levying taxes on the Red Sea commerce long before the Romans ever arrived in Egypt.<sup>26</sup> Thus, when all the evidence is examined, it seems that the only view the Roman imperial administration took of the eastern trade was as a source of revenue. This is as close as we can come to anything which can be termed an imperial 'policy' toward the eastern long-distance trade.

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<sup>26</sup> For a summary of the Ptolemaic trade and its taxes see S.E. Sidebotham *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa*, 2-12.



## VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout this whole study, it has again and again been found that the proactive economic policies which have been put forward by many historians of the spice trade cannot be substantiated, and that the Romans seem to have adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude to the eastern commerce. In addition, many of the ideas which have held sway about the nature of the trade have been found to be false. Many of these ideas have centred on a more 'modernist' approach to the Roman economy which sees the Roman world as not greatly dissimilar to our own.<sup>1</sup> While many of these notions have already been rejected, some of them still make regular appearances when the eastern trade is being discussed.

Accordingly, it will be profitable to review in this section the observations which have been made in the preceding pages concerning the trade. Firstly, the nature of the trade itself, and the degree of government interference and intervention must be reviewed. Following this, the attitude of the Roman government to the commerce with respect to the formation of foreign policy will be noted, together with the effect that the commerce had on the local political formations of the Roman East. It will be seen that, while we should rightly reject some of the views which have been held about the eastern long-distance trade of the Roman Empire, the commerce can still nonetheless be identified as a significant influence in the Roman East.

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<sup>1</sup> For these modernistic views of the Roman economy and the eastern trade see I. 1 and I. 2 above.

## VII.1 The Nature of the Trade

In general, it has been found that the eastern commerce of the Roman Empire was able to operate with relatively little government interference. While modern governments may attempt to foster their own economies by various interventionist means, it would appear that the Roman government did not do so. In no case has there been found concrete evidence, be it literary, archaeological, or otherwise, that the Romans ever tried to influence or control the commerce in any way. While indeed many have put forward ideas of an interventionist policy on the part of Rome toward the trade, conclusive evidence for such policies has been conspicuously absent.

Indeed, of all the evidence that has been examined which describes individuals involved in the trade, none can be identified which speaks of a direct governmental involvement. Instead, on each occasion private individuals or associations of individuals are described who are in business for themselves and striving to make profit on their own behalf. While some individuals associated with the trade may have also held some government post,<sup>2</sup> there is no reason to assume that they are trading on behalf of the government: rather they are far more likely to be simply involved in both commercial interests as well as working for the Roman government.

One of the most instructive documents for learning about the individuals involved in the commerce and the conduct of that commerce is the Vienna papyrus, *P.Vindob. G 40822*. In the text of this papyrus, several individuals are encountered, both private traders and government officials.<sup>3</sup> The private traders include the merchant, the creditor of the loan, and a camel-driver, each of whom is apparently

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<sup>2</sup> Annianus Plocamus seems to have been one such example: see Pliny *NH* VI. 24 and II. 3 above.

either in business in the Red Sea trade himself or an employee of such a person. There are indeed several government officials encountered in the papyrus too, but without exception the sole interest they display is the collection of taxes: the *arabarch* at the Red Sea port, the customs-collector at Coptos, and the collector of the 25% tax at Alexandria. As has been seen, the entirety of the Roman military and government presence in the Eastern Desert of Egypt (and therefore most likely in other areas associated with the trade also) can be explained from this desire to collect the extensive taxes which accrued from the trade.<sup>4</sup>

Just as there is no evidence for government involvement in the commerce, so there is also no evidence that the Romans ever directed the trade or attempted to encourage some trade routes over others, for whatever ends. Many works on the eastern trade, even in some quite recent writing, state that the Romans ‘developed’ or ‘preferred’ certain trade routes for either commercial motives, for example to allow the trade to bypass the war zone between Rome and Parthia;<sup>5</sup> or for political ends, such as to weaken the Nabataean kingdom and eliminate Arab ‘middlemen’, so bringing the commerce into ‘Roman’ hands.<sup>6</sup> In either case, as has been seen throughout this work, the evidence does not support such theories. Instead, it would appear that the merchants themselves sought out new routes when the old ones became unstable or unusable for some reason, and the Romans *reacted* to this by the construction of roads and the provision of military protection where necessary, in order to secure the tax income which the trade provided. For example, in Roman Egypt Strabo records

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<sup>3</sup> *P. Vindob.* G 40822 recto, col. 2, 1-26 - col. 3, 1.

<sup>4</sup> See II. 4 above.

<sup>5</sup> See V. 2 above.

<sup>6</sup> See III. 2 above.

that the number of merchants using the Red Sea ports jumped dramatically in the first few years of Roman administration,<sup>7</sup> and well before the construction of roads and facilities in the Eastern Desert, the majority of which work appears to have been done in the reign of Tiberius. Clearly it was the merchants who developed the route, responding to the increased stability of Egypt under Roman rule and the new prosperity brought about by the Augustan peace.<sup>8</sup> It was only after this, and in reaction to it, that the Romans developed the route by the construction of facilities and the provision of military protection.

This pattern is repeated throughout the whole area of the eastern trade. The Nabataeans were bringing frankincense and myrrh from Arabia Felix long before the Romans took over the region, and the Palmyrenes developed their own trade route to the head of the Persian Gulf without Roman assistance. In each case it is the merchants themselves who appear to have developed the trade routes, and the Roman authorities who responded to these developments by the provision of facilities to protect their tax income.

Indeed, it would appear to have been the tax income that constituted the main area of interest in the eastern trade as far as the Roman government was concerned. This income, as has been seen, would have been quite considerable and possibly equivalent to the direct tax income of some provinces.<sup>9</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Romans would have taken steps to ensure that this revenue was safeguarded and maximised. This would account for the sizable military presence in areas where the eastern traffic operated, yet the lack of any apparent intent to guide

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<sup>7</sup> Strabo *Geog.* II. 5. 12

<sup>8</sup> See I. 6 & II. 2 above.

or influence the trade, which we might expect if the Roman government had taken an actively interventionist stance toward the commerce. Since they were only interested in securing the tax income from the trade, however, they did not take any interest in guiding it toward certain routes; only in ensuring that where it did come that the merchants were protected from brigandage and prevented from disposing of their goods before the proper taxes had been paid. In addition, it was probably felt that in the interests of order and the suppression of banditry that the valuable caravans be protected, as they would otherwise have provided an attractive target for bandits. Nonetheless, the customs revenues seem to have remained far and away the most significant consideration in the involvement of the Roman government with the eastern commerce.

Another area which has been noted is the apparent independence of the various trade routes, and the general absence of restrictive monopolies in the commerce, which again contradicts much that has been written about the trade. It has been seen that routes, such as that through Palmyra and that through Egypt, could co-exist without any apparently deleterious effects upon one another: the Antonine period, for instance, seems to have been a time when both these routes flourished, despite the fact they both depended on spice and silk markets in northwestern India. As would presumably be confirmed by the high prices which these goods continued to command in Rome right throughout our period of study, the market was sufficiently buoyant to support both trade routes at the time. That these high prices were not the result of restrictive monopolies has also been demonstrated: the

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<sup>9</sup> See VI. 2 above.

monopolies which are often suggested for Parthia and South Arabia have been shown never to have existed.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the character of the long-distance eastern trade of the Roman Empire in the period under consideration appears to have been a rather unrestricted and unregulated one, with very little government involvement in the actual trade itself. While the Roman government was keen to ensure that the money from customs duties levied on the trade continued to come into the imperial treasury, and took appropriate steps to ensure this was the case, the actual conduct of the commerce seems to have been exclusively in the hands of private entrepreneurs. As far as can be told from the evidence, the creation and abandonment of trading routes, the equipment of ships and caravans for the conveyance of the goods, the financing, reprocessing and sale of the goods were all done by the initiative of the private individuals involved in the trade, with an absolute minimum of government interference and regulation. The views of the eastern trade which postulate an active role for the government in the conduct of the commerce are without support from the evidence, and should accordingly be rejected in the absence of convincing proof. By contrast, it is felt that the model of the trade as presented here is in closer accord with our surviving evidence.

## **VII.2 The Effect of the Trade on Roman Foreign Policy**

In line with this general lack of government interference in the trade except for the purposes of tax gathering, it has also been found that the Roman government did not allow its foreign policy to be influenced by the needs of the eastern trade. Several

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<sup>10</sup> See I. 6 (South Arabia) and V. 2 (Parthia).

acts of the Roman government in the East have been on various occasions been put forward as having been influenced by the 'need' to 'cut out the middleman' or something similar: in fact, the motives suggested are usually the same as those given for the direct involvement of the government in the trade as outlined in the previous section. As was outlined in the body of this work, such expeditions as Aelius Gallus' Arabian expedition, the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom in A.D. 106, and Trajan's Parthian war, among others, have been attributed to trade motivations.<sup>11</sup>

In each of these cases, however, it has been seen that there are other motives which far more readily explain Roman actions, and no convincing case can be put forward to sustain a mercantile motivation for these expeditions. Indeed, this is what we would expect given the conclusions reached in the previous section. Instead, recent work has shown that in most cases a far less sophisticated motive lay at the root of Roman policy in the East in the classical period. Isaac's recent reappraisal of the role played by Roman troops in the East has shown that they were generally there to perform police duties or poised for aggressive war against powers outside the Empire.<sup>12</sup> While some have disputed his conclusions,<sup>13</sup> it would certainly seem that the case for the use of Roman military power to promote the interests of the long-distance trade is no longer defensible. The lack of any evidence in favour of such foreign policy moves on the part of Rome would support Isaac's thesis, at least as far as commercial motivations for Roman military actions is concerned.

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<sup>11</sup> For the discussions of these expeditions see III. 2 (Gallus' Arabian expedition); III. 4 (annexation of the Nabataean kingdom) and V. 2 (Trajan's Parthian war).

<sup>12</sup> B. Isaac *The Limits of Empire*, 101-218.

<sup>13</sup> For the current state of research on the Roman military presence in the East see D.L. Kennedy "The Roman Army in the East" in D.L. Kennedy (ed.) *The Roman Army in the East*, 9-24.

Indeed, throughout this work it has been noted that the one overriding factor which exerted a favourable influence upon the eastern trade was peace. Far from acting in the favour of the traders involved in the commerce, the frequent outbreak of hostilities in the East, especially with Parthia and later Persia, seem invariably to have brought the commerce to an immediate halt.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that these military expeditions were not in the interests of the eastern commerce or of its practitioners, be they Roman or non-Roman. Rather, the frequent outbreak of hostilities in the East (almost always at the initiative of Rome until the mid-third century)<sup>15</sup> vividly shows the *lack* of regard with which the Romans held the needs of the eastern trade in the formulation of their foreign policy. If the Romans had been interested in promoting the trade, the best policy they could have followed in the east would have been a pacifistic, non-interventionist one. This, they clearly did not do.

It is also interesting to note that, even though the Romans *were* clearly interested in collecting the tax income from the eastern trade, even this interest seems to have had little influence on the formulation of foreign policy. When war stopped the trade, it also of course stopped the tax income from that trade: yet the Romans continued to make war on the Parthians. Even the lucrative tax income was of little or no influence in the determination of Roman policy in the East, notwithstanding the substantial investment that had been made in the collection of these taxes. This would seem to indicate that a grave mistake is being made if we search for 'modern' reasons for war (i.e. economic motives) in explaining Roman actions in the East. The fact is, most of the Roman wars in the East, and very likely elsewhere as well, made no

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<sup>14</sup> See IV. 1 above.

<sup>15</sup> B. Isaac *The Limits of Empire*, 19-33.



economic sense at all: the motivations for Roman aggression lie far more in Roman ideology than they do in the Roman economy.

There is no justification for the commonly held views that the needs of the long-distance trade lay at the root of Roman policy in the East. On the contrary, as has been seen, it would appear that the often highly aggressive Roman policy toward Parthia and in the East in general was very much *against* the interests of the eastern commerce. Even the tax income from the trade, which must have been considerable, appears to have been of no account in the formulation of Roman foreign policy. Evidently, the Romans had other priorities in mind when they formulated their policy toward the powers of the East.

### **VII.3 The Effect of the Trade on the Communities of the Roman East**

Despite the absence of any evidence that the commerce affected Roman policy to any real extent, the same cannot be said of the political formations of the Roman East itself, nor of the economies of many of the communities in the region. In some cases it would appear that the Eastern commerce had a very significant effect on communities of the Roman East, although this is by no means universally the case.

The community upon which the eastern trade appears to have had the most profound effect was Palmyra. As has been seen, the social and political structure of this city, and indeed perhaps some of the peculiarly independent status which it seems to have enjoyed, was deeply influenced both directly and indirectly by the

city's commerce with the head of the Persian Gulf.<sup>16</sup> Such phenomena as the recording of services to the caravan trade in public honorific inscriptions, and even in the *cursus honorum* of one of the city's leading citizens, would indicate the high regard in which the trade was held by the city's administration and the high social position of the caravan leaders. While these caravan leaders do not appear to have been merchants themselves, they nonetheless were deeply involved in the caravan traffic and this reflects the high importance with which the trade was regarded at Palmyra. It seems therefore that the economic importance of the caravan traffic at Palmyra was significantly higher than the economic position of commerce generally in the Roman Empire,<sup>17</sup> and the social position of its practitioners was much higher than that of merchants throughout the bulk of the Roman world.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in the Nabataean kingdom there seems to have been some effect of the incense trade on elements of the kingdom's makeup. Although in this case there is virtually no evidence whereby we might learn of the social position of the merchants involved in this commerce, it does seem that the prosperity brought by the incense traffic contributed significantly to the wealth of the kingdom. In addition, it seems that many of the policy decisions of the Nabataean kings, such as the construction of posts at Medain Saleh, Leuke Kome and Jawf, were motivated by the needs of the incense trade.<sup>19</sup>

In other communities of the Roman East, however, the trade exerted a less profound, or at least not so readily discernible, influence. The bulk of Roman Egypt

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<sup>16</sup> See IV. 3, 4 above.

<sup>17</sup> M.I. Finley *The Ancient Economy*, 59 and see I. 3 above.

<sup>18</sup> See IV. 4 above.

<sup>19</sup> See III. 4 above.

and Syria seem to have been unaffected by the passage of the goods of the eastern trade through their territory, at least as far as is indicated by the information which we have available today. It is perhaps possible that in these communities there was a wider variety of potential sources of income, which may have tended to 'dilute' the economic impact of the eastern trade. Certainly there is nothing to suggest the deep social influence of the commerce as at Palmyra in any of these communities, nor any indication that it was an important factor in the determination of policy as may have been the case in the Nabataean kingdom. It is possible, therefore, that only in the case of communities which were on the fringe of the inhabited Mediterranean world, such as Palmyra and Petra, could the eastern trade acquire great significance. In such places, the economic input from agriculture and herding and other such activities must necessarily have been limited due to the nature of the places concerned, and so the not inconsiderable wealth possible from the caravan trade became the easiest road to prosperity for these communities. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the social position of merchants and the importance of the caravan trade in the determination of policy were far in advance of that which was current in 'normal' Roman provincial society.

It would therefore seem that the impact of the eastern trade on Roman communities in the East depended greatly on the presence or absence of alternative sources of income. In the bulk of the Roman East where the economy was not significantly different from the rest of the Empire, the eastern trade may have had some regional impact but this has been lost to us. The commerce does not appear to have profoundly affected these places at all. In a few cases, however, the trade seems

to have exerted more influence. These occasions seem to be those where the trade is the only or the major source of prosperity for the community. In these cases, something akin to Rostovtzeff's idea of a "Caravan City" may have emerged, where, even if the caravan commerce was not the only reason for the city's existence, it was a dominant factor in the life of the community.

#### **VII.4 Summary of Conclusions**

Thus, the picture which we have established concerning the eastern trade of the Roman Empire is a very different one to that which has often been presented. The often presented ideas of trade monopolies being broken, maintained and redirected by a Roman government which was interested in the promotion of commerce and/or the retention of the commerce in Roman hands have been shown to be essentially without foundation. By contrast, a picture of the trade has emerged which shows a much less regulated environment in which nearly all of the initiative for the development and continuance of the trade belongs to private individuals, or perhaps some of the local governments of the Roman East, especially when such governments enjoyed a certain degree of independence, as appears to have been the case at Palmyra.

Despite this, the eastern long-distance trade can still be seen to have had several important political effects upon the East. Perhaps the most noticeable effects were those upon the local political formations of the region, especially at such locations as Palmyra and Petra where the trade was of great significance to the local economy. In these places, the eastern commerce became a significant factor in the prosperity of the city, and so it became a dominant factor in the social and political

makeup and the pursuit of policy in some cases. Generally speaking, however, the more provincial societies were integrated into the Roman Empire and the more the financial significance of the trade was diluted by the presence of other sources of revenue, the less influence the eastern commerce seems to have had on the society in question.

This is especially the case when dealing with the Empire itself as a political unit. The imperial government of Rome had many other priorities beside the eastern trade when it came to the formation of policy, and consequently there is not one policy initiative of the Roman government in the period under consideration which can be primarily attributed to the needs of the eastern trade. While it is true that the Roman government seems to have regarded the eastern commerce as a source of considerable revenue, and taken steps to ensure that this revenue was secure, it becomes obvious that their interest in the commerce went no further than the collection of taxes, and when the imperatives of Roman foreign policy and ideology intervened the needs of the eastern commerce and its practitioners were of little or no account.

The trade between Rome and the East in the classical period should therefore be seen in a very different way to the manner in which it has often been understood. The evidence which we have in our possession clearly requires that we abandon ideas of an imperially directed commercial policy, the use of commerce as a tool of imperial foreign policy and an economically interventionist imperial government. Instead, we have a picture of a trade which was run largely at the initiative of the enterprising men and women who were actively engaged in it: it was these individuals who pioneered

the trade routes, who chose the routes to be taken at any particular time, who organised protection and who drove the deals which ensured them a profit. In all this time, the imperial government, when it expressed any interest at all in the trade, saw it only as a source of indirect taxation.

This pattern of trade remained substantially unchanged throughout the bulk of the period under study. Only at the end of this time was the trade temporarily crippled by the political and financial crisis of the third century A.D. When the Empire regained stability at the beginning of the fourth century, the trade regained some of its earlier vigour as well. However, it was now established upon different patterns and in many cases different routes to those that had been used in the first three centuries of the current era. For this reason, then, it is appropriate to end this study at the beginning of the fourth century, although some reference has been made to the trade in the fourth century to show the way in which the patterns of commerce had altered. The trade throughout the Byzantine period up until the Arab conquest forms a separate portion of the history of the Roman eastern trade which is deserving of its own study.

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **PRICES OF GOODS OF THE EASTERN TRADE AT ROME IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.**

Information concerning the prices of various items of the Eastern trade at Rome would be a useful tool in determining the relative accessibility of these goods in the Classical period. There is evidence of considerable knowledge of these goods in Roman society, especially in the upper echelons. This would seem to indicate that the eastern trade did not consist of a few traders trafficking merchandise of extreme rarity and astronomical price to the very rich only, but a commerce which could be carried on in some volume.

While the impression gained from the study of the trade in, for example, Egypt appears to confirm that the trade was carried on in some considerable volume, a study of prices is necessary to indicate whether or not the goods were in fact accessible to those of medium income at Rome. Such accessibility would, presumably, be a necessary precondition for the apparently large volume of the commerce in the first three centuries A.D. Fortunately, one source from this period does give prices for items of the eastern trade, and thus we do have some basis for attempting to reconstruct the accessibility of these goods to various social strata at Rome.

### *Prices According to Pliny NH*

Pliny the Elder gives a list of prices of various goods of the eastern trade.<sup>1</sup> These would appear to have been the approximate retail prices of these items at Rome in Pliny's time although, as Pliny himself notes, the prices of goods could be dramatically affected by various outside influences such as a fire in the areas where the particular commodity was grown.<sup>2</sup> These are of course by no means all of the items of the eastern trade: these prices form a part of Pliny's discussion of plants in Books XII-XIII of his *Historia Naturalis*, and therefore they only deal with plant products in the trade. Nonetheless, they do provide us with a good insight into the approximate value of several of the commodities of the Eastern trade at Rome in the first century A.D.

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<sup>1</sup> See I. 4 above.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny *NH* XII. 42



TABLE A. 1: COMMODITIES OF THE EASTERN TRADE			
Prices per Roman pound in Pliny's <i>NH</i> XII			
Commodity	Type	Reference	<i>Denarii</i>
Ammoniacum		XII. 49	2
Amomum	in cluster	XII. 28	60
	broken	XII. 28	48
Bdellium		XII. 19	3
Cardamom		XII. 29	12
Cassia		XII. 43	50
Cinnamon		XII. 42	10
	Daphnitis	XII. 43	300
Costus		XII. 25	5.5
Frankincense	1st. quality	XII. 32	6
	2nd. quality	XII. 32	5
	3rd. quality	XII. 32	3
Ginger		XII. 28	6
Ladanum		XII. 37	2.5
Malabathron	Oil	XII. 54	100-300
	Large Leaf	XII. 26	40
	Medium Leaf	XII. 26	60
	Small Leaf	XII. 26	75
Myrrh	Trogodytic	XII. 35	16.5
	Erythraean	XII. 35	16
	Perfumiers'	XII. 35	12
Nard	Large Leaf	XII. 26	40
	Medium Leaf	XII. 26	60
	Small Leaf	XII. 26	75
	Spikenard Oil	XII. 26	100
Pepper	Long	XII. 28	15
	White	XII. 28	7
	Black	XII. 28	4
Styrax		XII. 55	17
Sweet Flag		XII. 48	1
Sweet Rush		XII. 48	5

### *The Accessibility of the Goods*

To gain some idea of the relative value of these goods, it will be instructive to compare what is known from this era of the prices of wheat and some other items, as well as wages in this period. For example, the basic distribution of grain given to the *plebs* at Rome in the first century was 5 *modii* per month, and other evidence

suggests that this was seen as an acceptable subsistence level.<sup>3</sup> The price of this wheat in the first century was approximately HS 3-4 per *modius* in most of the Empire, varying up to about HS 8-10 at Rome itself, where prices were often much higher than in the provinces.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the goods of the eastern trade would have been well out of the reach of a person existing at a bare subsistence level.<sup>5</sup> However, it does indicate that they were not out of the reach of a person of fairly moderate means: even a soldier receiving HS 100 per month in the first century A.D. might not find some of the cheaper items beyond his reach, should he so desire. In addition, we should consider the fact that most of the goods would only be used in very small quantities, which would make their use accessible even to those of quite limited means on some occasions. Certainly, to the wealthy members of Roman society such items could have been purchased on a grand scale, and a person such as a merchant or artisan of adequate means could purchase them as well.

The items of the eastern trade, while certainly costly in the first century, were nonetheless not prohibitively so: a relatively extensive cross-section of Roman society would have been able to purchase them. Indeed, the seemingly widespread knowledge of the existence and uses of these commodities at Rome recorded by the literature of the day indicates that a relatively broad cross-section of Roman society indeed *did* buy them:<sup>6</sup> though impossible to quantify, we can be sure that there was a buoyant market for the goods of the eastern trade at Rome in the first century A.D.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Duncan-Jones *The Economy of the Roman Empire*, 146. See ILS 2267, 8379.

<sup>4</sup> Pliny *NH* XVIII. 90 (prices at Rome); Tacitus *Annales* XV. 39 (controlled price). See R. Duncan-Jones *The Economy of the Roman Empire*, 145-147; 345-347.

<sup>5</sup> An example of such a subsistence level might be the allowance paid to an urban slave in the first century: HS 20 plus 5 *modii* of grain per month; see Seneca *Ep. Mor.* LXXX. 7. Goods such as frankincense and pepper would certainly have been an unaffordable luxury to such a person.

<sup>6</sup> See I. 4 above.

## *Conclusion*

Thus, the prices of these goods in Pliny's time placed them within the reach of a relatively large proportion of Roman society, although it would be impossible to try to determine exact figures. Nonetheless, the relative level of accessibility of these goods appears to confirm the conclusions reached in the text: that the eastern trade of Rome was at its height carried out in quite a considerable volume, and was able to provide a significant number of people in the East, and even the majority of some cities (e.g. Palmyra and perhaps Petra) with a significant living. If the goods of the eastern trade had been prohibitively expensive and only available to the extremely wealthy, such a situation would never have been able to arise.

Accordingly, the evidence from the prices of the goods of the eastern commerce seems to support the assertion that the Roman trade in the East fed a considerable consumer market: the idea of a 'luxury trade' in items of eastern provenance is somewhat misleading and should be rejected, or at least modified. Many of the items of the eastern trade were probably considered, if not necessities, then certainly relatively everyday consumer goods.

## APPENDIX B:

### SILVER CONTENT OF NABATAEAN AND ROMAN COINS IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.

In Section III. 2, the silver content of the Nabataean coinage was discussed, and mention was made of the theory that a sharp decline in the fineness of this coinage in the first century A.D. reflected a downturn in the Nabataean economy which itself was caused by the loss of the aromatics trade passing through Petra.<sup>1</sup> It was pointed out, however, that the decline in the silver content of the Nabataean coinage, while indeed sharp, was paralleled by a similar, although far less serious, decline in the silver content of Roman imperial *denarii* over the same period. This was illustrated by means of two graphs, showing respectively the fineness of Nabataean silver coins, and also the fineness of the Roman imperial coinage.

The figures from which Graph III. 1, showing the silver content of Nabataean coins, was drawn are recorded in the following chart, showing individual coins according to their date, reign and respective fineness:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Negev "Numismatics and Nabataean Chronology", 124-126.

<sup>2</sup> This table is based upon Y. Meshorer *Nabataean Coins*, 73-74.

**TABLE B. 1: NABATAEAN SILVER COINAGE**

Silver Content of Nabataean Coins 28 B.C. - A.D. 100

Coin No. (Meshorer)	Reign	Year	Silver Content
21	Obodas II	28 B.C.	93.5%
21	Obodas II	28 B.C.	85%
23	Obodas II	25 B.C.	83%
28	Obodas II	23 B.C.	73%
30A	Obodas II	21 B.C. (?)	74%
32	Obodas II	14 B.C.	72%
38	Obodas II	11 B.C.	65.5%
40	Obodas II (Syllaeus)	9 B.C.	74%
41	Obodas II (Syllaeus)	9 B.C.	73.5%
46	Aretas IV	9 B.C.	68%
47A	Aretas IV	9 B.C.	70%
49	Aretas IV	9 B.C.	72%
51	Aretas IV	8 B.C.	47%
52	Aretas IV	7 B.C.	73%
53	Aretas IV	6 B.C.	54%
65	Aretas IV	4 B.C.	72%
94	Aretas IV	A.D. 7	62%
94	Aretas IV	A.D. 7	41.5%
94	Aretas IV	A.D. 7	54%
96	Aretas IV	A.D. 18	39%
100	Aretas IV	A.D. 21	36%
103	Aretas IV	A.D. 25	51%
103	Aretas IV	A.D. 25	35.5%
104	Aretas IV	A.D. 26	36%
105	Aretas IV	A.D. 27	34%
107	Aretas IV	A.D. 32	35%
108	Aretas IV	A.D. 35	38%
108	Aretas IV	A.D. 35	34%
124	Malchus II	A.D. 42	40.5%
127	Malchus II	A.D. 45	33%
130	Malchus II	A.D. 48	42%
130	Malchus II	A.D. 48	25%
132	Malchus II	A.D. 50	20%
134	Malchus II	A.D. 55	20%
135	Malchus II	A.D. 56	20%
138	Malchus II	A.D. 61	20%
138	Malchus II	A.D. 61	20%
142	Rabbel II	A.D. 70	20%
144	Rabbel II	A.D. 72	20%
144	Rabbel II	A.D. 72	40.5%
145	Rabbel II	A.D. 72	40.5%
147	Rabbel II	A.D. 75	40.5%
148	Rabbel II	A.D. 78	42%
149	Rabbel II	A.D. 80	20%
151	Rabbel II	A.D. 86	20%
152	Rabbel II	A.D. 89	20%
156	Rabbel II	A.D. 93	20%
159	Rabbel II	A.D. 99	20%
160	Rabbel II	A.D. 100	20%

The figures show a far greater fluctuation than do the Roman coins in the next chart, but this is partially attributable to the far smaller sample, which has allowed individual coins to be recorded in the graph and table. This would have been far too unwieldy in the case of the Roman coins due to the large numbers of coins used to reach an average weight and fineness.

As already noted in Chapter III, the Roman *denarius* over the same period shows a roughly parallel decline in silver content, although of a much smaller order. While the Nabataean coins decline from over 90% fine to only 20% by the end of the century, the fineness of the Roman coins declines over the same period from around 98% down to a little over 92%. The figures from which Graph III. 2 was drawn are as follows:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This table is based upon D.R. Walker *The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage* I (Oxford 1976), 5-18; 84-108; and II (Oxford 1977), 3-5.

**TABLE B. 2: ROMAN IMPERIAL ISSUES**

Average Silver Content of Roman Imperial Denarii 30 B.C. - A.D. 100			
Coin Type	Silver %	Weight (g)	Silver Weight (g)
Augustus, Italian Mint, 30-27 B.C.	96.84%	3.64	3.52
Augustus, Emerita, 25-23 B.C.	97.63%	3.73	3.64
Augustus, Spanish Mint 1, 25-17 B.C.	98.08%	3.74	3.65
Augustus, Spanish Mint 2, 25-16 B.C.	97.44%	3.75	3.51
Mint of Rome, 19-12 B.C.	96.24%	3.72	3.58
Augustus, Lugdunum, 15 B.C.-A.D. 14	97.91%	3.69	3.65
Tiberius, A.D. 14-37	98.07%	3.72	3.64
Gaius, A.D. 37-41	97.69%	3.68	3.59
Claudius, A.D. 41-54	98.00%	3.56	3.59
Nero, pre-reform, A.D. 54-64	97.35%	3.57	3.47
Nero, post reform, A.D. 64-68	93.48%	3.18	2.97
Galba, A.D. 68-69	93.20%	3.23	3.01
Otho, A.D. 69	93.59%	3.28	3.06
Vitellius, A.D. 69	92.47%	3.21	2.96
Vespasian, A.D. 70	88.28%	3.20	2.82
Vespasian, A.D. 70-72	89.29%	3.17	2.82
Vespasian, A.D. 72-73	91.68%	3.21	2.94
Vespasian, A.D. 73	88.65%	3.25	2.83
Vespasian, A.D. 74	90.52%	3.19	2.88
Vespasian, A.D. 75	91.89%	3.18	2.91
Vespasian, A.D. 76	90.86%	3.19	2.89
Vespasian, A.D. 77-78	89.77%	3.19	2.85
Vespasian, A.D. 79	90.78%	3.23	2.93
Titus, A.D. 79	92.69%	3.20	2.96
Titus, A.D. 80	91.73%	3.21	2.94
Domitian, A.D. 81	90.56%	3.19	2.89
Domitian, 1st Reform, A.D. 82-85	98.01%	3.33	3.26
Domitian, 2nd Reform, A.D. 85-88	93.43%	3.23	3.02
Domitian, A.D. 88-92	93.39%	3.28	3.05
Domitian, A.D. 92-96	93.75%	3.26	3.05
Nerva, A.D. 96	93.08%	3.20	2.97
Nerva, A.D. 97	93.19%	3.23	3.01
Trajan, A.D. 98-99	93.55%	3.27	3.05
Trajan, A.D. 100	92.38%	3.22	2.97

When the two tables, and their accompanying graphs, are compared, a broad parallel in decline can be discerned. This is not to say, of course, that there is a corresponding trough in the Roman chart for every dip in value in the Nabataean coinage, as this is simply not the case. However, we should bear in mind that most of the fluctuations in the Roman coinage were caused by expenditure problems at Rome: thus, the devaluation of Nero's reign was necessitated by the profligate expenditure under that emperor, while the dip in value in Vespasian's reign was caused by the massive expenditure of the civil wars of A.D. 68-69 and the Jewish war of A.D. 66-

74, both of which caused serious economic pressure at Rome.<sup>4</sup> These expenditures would not have immediately caused a devaluation in the Nabataean kingdom, and so we do not find an exact parallel between the devaluations in the two realms. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that the two gradual devaluations show a link.

The Nabataean kingdom, regardless of the health of its economy or its aromatics trade, would be unable to escape the long-term effects of a silver shortage at Rome, such as is evidenced by the devaluation of the *denarius*. The two charts, as has already been seen, show a roughly parallel decline, making it most likely that the decline in the fineness of the Nabataean silver coinage is indeed derived not from the loss of the aromatics trade but from the flow-on effect of the Roman shortage of silver, or indeed of any pressure on the Roman silver coinage. The shortage would have been far worse in the Nabataean realm simply because of the fact that the Near East depended on imported silver, and had no reserves of its own.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a decline in value over a few percent at Rome is translated into a far more severe decline in the Nabataean kingdom. For this reason, we see the Nabataean silver coinage slowly debased to the point that it would have been useless except for internal transactions within the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

This greater difficulty in obtaining silver in the east is illustrated to some extent by the silver content of the tetradrachms minted at Antioch during the first

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<sup>4</sup> D.R. Walker *The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage* III, 138.

<sup>5</sup> K. Harl *Coinage in the Roman Economy*, 103.

<sup>6</sup> A. Negev "Numismatics and Nabataean Chronology", 126.



century. These also show a gradual decline through the first century, again roughly parallel to the Roman imperial coinage and the Nabataean coinage:<sup>7</sup>

TABLE B. 3: SYRIAN TETRADRACHMS (ANTIOCH)			
Average Silver Content of Syrian Tetradrachms 34 B.C. - A.D. 100			
Coin Type	Silver %	Weight (g)	Silver Weight (g)
Antony & Cleopatra VII, 34-33 B.C.	80.66%	15.04	12.13
Pseudo-Seleucid, 30-13 B.C.	72.88%	14.16	10.31
Augustus 'Zeus' type, 5 B.C.	72.75%	14.01	10.19
Augustus 'Tyche' type, 5 B.C. - A.D. 12	78.43%	14.74	11.56
Tiberius, A.D. 17-37	65.75%	14.43	9.48
Gaius, A.D. 37-41	67.75%	14.52	9.83
Claudius, A.D. 41-50	82.50%	13.58	11.20
Nero, A.D. 56-57	63.16%	14.50	9.15
Nero, Tyrian Standard, A.D. 59-63	79.39%	14.66	11.63
Nero, A.D. 65-69	78.00%	14.35	11.19
Galba, A.D. 68-69	85.15%	14.45	12.30
Otho, A.D. 69	85.12%	14.57	12.40
Vespasian, A.D. 70-74	81.00%	14.25	11.83
Domitian, A.D. 81-92	81.50%	14.43	11.79
Nerva, A.D. 96-98	88.79%	14.78	13.12
Trajan, A.D. 98-100	80.50%	14.50	11.67

Here, although again the decline in the silver content is nowhere near as severe as that under the Nabataean kings, we do see a more severe debasement than at Rome, probably reflecting the greater difficulty of obtaining silver at Antioch. Also, the declines in silver content are generally parallel to the two coinages already surveyed, showing that there was a general decline in the availability of silver at that time, and that it was this that most likely caused the devaluation of the Nabataean coinage.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the greater difficulty in gaining silver supplies which the Nabataean kingdom experienced might also account for the debasements of the coinage which occurred in the earlier first century, when the Roman imperial issues were still stable. One possibility is the massive building program which appears to have been

<sup>7</sup> This table is based upon D.R. Walker *The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage* I, 56-69; 133-137; and II, 91-93.

<sup>8</sup> An exception to the general pattern is found in the Nero tetradrachms beginning in A.D. 59, when the fineness jumps from 63% to about 80%. However, the fine tetradrachms of Tyre which had been nearly

undertaken in the first century at Petra, at which time the majority of the great monuments of the city were constructed.<sup>9</sup> The expenditure undertaken at this time, which must have been immense, could well account for the decline in the silver content seen in the reign of Aretas IV. Again, as with the general silver shortage of the later first century, the silver coinage of the Nabataeans was greatly devalued at this time due to the difficulty of obtaining silver. Indeed, throughout all the first century, there is no need to link the fineness of the Nabataean silver coinage with the health of the aromatics trade through Petra in any way.

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95% fine had ceased production in A.D. 58, and the revaluation of the Antiochene tetradrachm and its retariffing from 3 *denarii* to 4 at this time was probably designed to take over the role of this coin.

<sup>9</sup> J. McKenzie *The Architecture of Petra*, 56.

**APPENDIX C:**  
**INSCRIPTIONS REFERRING TO PALMYRENE MILITARY**  
**ACTIVITIES A.D. 132 - 225**

As discussed in section IV. 3, there is some debate about the nature of the Palmyrene "caravan police" and its organisation and significance. While the military role of Palmyra after the appearance of Odaenathus is not in doubt, there are several inscriptions which, as discussed in the aforementioned section, appear to speak of an organised Palmyrene military under the direction of the city itself well before the third century. Accordingly, a list of these inscriptions together with a summary of the content of each is provided in this appendix.

*The Inscriptions*

1. *Baalshamin* III no. 45, A.D. 132; Palmyra: A caravan under Hagegu b. Iarhibol and Taimarsu b. Taimarsu having been saved by So'adu b. Bolyada, honours him with four statues in four sanctuaries; also for helping his fellow citizens in Vologesias, caravans and merchants.
2. *CIS* II. 3973, A.D. 132; Palmyra: These two altars were set up by 'Obaidu b. 'Anamu, a Nabataean, who was a cavalryman in Hirta and in the camp of 'Ana.
3. Unpublished, from Allat temple, Palmyra (see Gawlikowski "Palmyra as a Trading Centre" no. 15, p. 32), A.D. 144; Palmyra: A caravan of all the Palmyrenes returning from Vologesias which was attacked by robbers under 'Abdallat Ahitaya, honours So'adu b. Bolyada with four statues in four sanctuaries.

4. *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 909, c. A.D. 150 (Welles), after A.D. 164 (Gawlikowski "Palmyre et l'Euphrate", 61); Dura Europos: Dedication of the B'nai Mitha, the archers.
5. *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 845, A.D. 169; Dura Europos: Dedication of Ethpeni, *strategos* over the archers at Dura.
6. *Dura* VII-VIII, no. 846, A.D. 171; Dura Europos: Dedication of Zenobios, *strategos* of the archers.
7. *Baalshamin* III no. 51, after A.D. 188; Palmyra: Dedication by the cavalrymen of the detachment of 'Ana and Gamla.
8. *SEG* VII. 138, A.D. 198; Palmyra: Honouring Aelius Boras, *strategos* of the peace.
9. *Inv.* X. 44 = *SEG* VII. 139, A.D. 199; Palmyra: The Council honours 'Ogielu b. Maqqai, several times *strategos* against the nomads, having assured the security of merchants and of caravans under his leadership.
10. J. Cantineau "L'inscription de 'Umm es-Salâbih" *Syria* 14 (1933), 178-180, A.D. 225; Umm es-Selabikh: referring to a *strategos* of 'Ana and Gamla.
11. J. Starcky "Une inscription Palmyrénienne trouvée près de l'Euphrate" *Syria* 40 (1963), 47-55, no date; T1 (oil pumping station): Abgar b. Shalman came to the limits of the territory under the *strategeia* of Iarhai.

## APPENDIX D:

### THE CAREER OF SEPTIMIUS ODAENATHUS AND THE STATUS OF PALMYRA A.D. 251-267.

In Section IV. 5, the emergence of Palmyra as an independent military power in the mid-third century A.D. was noted, with particular attention to the possible role of the caravan trade in these developments. As was seen in that discussion, one man in particular is especially associated with this rise: Septimius Odaenathus the son of Hairan. During the career of this man, several changes seem to have occurred in the status of Palmyra before its eventual revolt in A.D. 270 or thereabouts. Accordingly, it is proposed in this study to examine the evidence, both literary and inscriptional, which allows us to understand something of the status of Palmyra in this period and the position of Septimius Odaenathus, its chief citizen. With this in mind, it is intended to divide the period into sub-sections, in which the progress of Odaenathus and Palmyra to some sort of military and perhaps political independence can be understood.

#### *A.D. 251 - 257/8*

During the first period, the prominence at Palmyra of Septimius Odaenathus is marked by his possession of an unusual title, expressed as RŠ 'DY TDMWR (ruler of Tadmor, i.e. Palmyra) in Palmyrene and as ἑξαρχος Παλμυρηνῶν in Greek. These are unique titles, and do not appear to correspond to any normal Greek or Roman official

positions. Nonetheless, it is possible that they reflect some sort of importance and/or leadership by Odaenathus at Palmyra in this period.

Palmyra itself was at this stage, and had been probably since the reign of Septimius Severus, a Roman *colonia*, administered in the normal Roman way by two *duumviri*, referred to at Palmyra by the normal Greek equivalent of *strategoi*.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 251 there is no indication that there was anything unusual about this particular *colonia*, apart from those things which had characterised Palmyra all along such as its dependence upon the long-distance caravan commerce and its possession of a substantial militia designed to protect the caravan traffic.<sup>2</sup> After this date, however, a series of inscriptions honouring Odaenathus begin to do so in terms which are unusual for a normally functioning Roman *colonia*, as they use, mixed in with the expected indicators of Roman rank, honors which appear to be peculiarly Palmyrene. In one such inscription, Odaenathus is referred to in Palmyrene simply as RŠ 'DY TDMWR without any other indicators of rank.<sup>3</sup> In others, however, Odaenathus is honoured by both this title (and its Greek equivalent of *ἑξαρχος Παλμυρηνῶν*) as well as indicators of Roman senatorial rank. This is seen in the following bilingual inscription recently discovered at Palmyra:

Σεπτίμιον 'Οδαίνα[θον Αἰ]ράνου Ο[ύαβ]αλλάθ[ου τοῦ Νασώρου]  
λα[μ]πρότατον [ἑ]ξαρχον Παλμυρηνῶν 'Ιούλιος Αὐρήλιος 'Αθηακά[βος  
'Ο]γήλου Ζαβδιβῶ[λου . . .] τοῦ καὶ Κωρα, τὸν φίλον στοργῆς ἔνεκεν,  
ἔτους γξϕ' μηνεὶ [Ξανδ]ικῶ.

SLM 'SPTMYWS '[DYNT BR ḤYRN] BR WHBLT NŠWR RŠ ['] DY  
[TDMW]R NHYR' D'BD LH 'T'QB BR 'GYLW BR ZBDBWL BR  
MQYMW DMQR' QR' RḤMH LYQRHWN BRBNWTH BYRH NYSN  
ŠNT 563.

<sup>1</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 327.

<sup>2</sup> See IV. 1, 3 & 4 above.

<sup>3</sup> J.T. Milik *Dédicaces*, 317.

To Septimius Odaenathus, son of Hairan son of Vaballathaus Nasor, the illustrious *exarch* of the Palmyrenes (*Palm.*: ruler of Tadmor), Julius Aurelius Ate‘aqab son of Ogeilu son of Zabdibol son of Moqimu, also called Qora (dedicated this) to his friend because of his affection (*Palm.*: to his friend, in his honour, during his presidency) in the year 563 in the month Xandikos (*Palm.*: in the month Nisan in the year 563) (April A.D. 252).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, another inscription dated at A.D. 251 honours Odaenathus' son Septimius Hairan with the same titles (illustrious senator and ruler of Tadmor), indicating that Odaenathus had associated his son with himself in these offices.<sup>5</sup>

The exact significance of these titles has been the occasion of some discussion. As has been noted, the expression *Ras Tadmor* is not paralleled by any term in normal Greek, Roman or for that matter Palmyrene administration.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, it was suggested by Ingholt that the term in fact refers to Odaenathus' leadership of the Palmyrene militia.<sup>7</sup> He then goes on to explain the obvious objection, that the term for such leaders is elsewhere attested as having been *strategos*,<sup>8</sup> by claiming that Odaenathus had been military leader of the whole Palmyrene army in the wars against Shapur that occurred throughout the 250's A.D.<sup>9</sup> This, however, should be rejected simply because there is absolutely no evidence that Odaenathus or Palmyra played any part in these conflicts at all. Even if it were the case, the title "ruler of Tadmor" would still seem unusual for a purely military leader.

Millar, on the other hand, states that there is no indication of an overall dominance of the city by Odaenathus, only of his patronage of various guilds and

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<sup>4</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Les princes de Palmyre", 257. As reproduced here, Gawlikowski provided no indication of line breaks in this preliminary publication.

<sup>5</sup> *Inv.* III. 16

<sup>6</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 389.

<sup>7</sup> H. Ingholt "Varia Tadmorea", 123.

<sup>8</sup> See IV. 3 above.

<sup>9</sup> H. Ingholt "Varia Tadmorea", 127-128.

persons—within the city.<sup>10</sup> However, the use of a title meaning “ruler” or “prince” seems even more extraordinary in such circumstances. On the whole, it would seem, as Potter concludes, that the uniqueness of the title and the fact it is only attested for members of Odaenathus’ family indicates that it is an extraordinary hereditary title conferred upon Odaenathus and his family, indicating his headship of the city.<sup>11</sup> We do not know when this was granted, or indeed what powers (if any) the title conferred, but it would seem most likely that it reflects and officially recognises a position of pre-eminence and great influence held by Odaenathus at Palmyra in this period.

It should still be noted, however, that Odaenathus is referred to by not only his Palmyrene titles but by normal Roman ones as well. In each of the inscriptions which refers to Odaenathus as RŠ ’DY TDMWR or something similar which are quoted above, he is also described as *λαμπρότατος*, which is the usual Greek equivalent of the Latin *clarissimus*. This would thus indicate that Odaenathus was a member of the senatorial order, and thus among the very highest elite in Palmyra. Indeed, this rank is often indicated explicitly in the inscriptions by the term *συγκλητικός*.<sup>12</sup> There are in fact two more inscriptions which would appear to have come from this period that mention only Odaenathus’ Roman rank, without mention of the unusual Palmyrene titles. One of these is a tomb inscription apparently set up by Odaenathus himself:

τὸ μνημῖον τοῦ ταφεῶνος ἔκτισεν ἐξ ἰδίων Σεπτίμιος Ὀδαίναθος ὁ  
λαμπρότατος[ος συγκλητικός]

<sup>10</sup> Based on the inscription dedicated by a soldier mentioned above (*Inv.* III. 16) and those dedicated by trade associations mentioned below. See F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 389.

<sup>12</sup> Referring to his adlection to the senatorial order. See *Inv.* VIII. 55; III. 16.



Αἰράνου Οὐαβαλλάθου τοῦ Νασώρου αὐτῷ τε καὶ υἱοῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ  
υἱωνοῖς εἰς τὸ παντελὲς αἰῶνιον τειμήν.

Septimius Odaenathus the illustrious senator, son of Hairan son of Vaballathus son of Nasor built this funerary monument from his own expense for himself, his children and his grandchildren, in (their) honour, for eternity.<sup>13</sup>

The other was set up in Odaenathus' honour by the city of Tyre, indicating his widespread fame. It is also perhaps significant that this inscription from a city of Roman Syria does not use the unusual Palmyrene titles, but only the Roman ones:

Σεπτίμ. Ὀδαίναθον τὸν λαμπρότατ. Σεπτιμία Κολ Τύρος ἡ  
μητρόπολις.

To the illustrious Septimius Odaenathus, Septimia Colonia Tyros the metropolis (dedicated this).<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the significance of Odaenathus' Palmyrene titles, it should therefore be borne in mind that they were coupled with indicators of Roman rank, and borne in a Roman context. For example, even after the appearance of Odaenathus bearing titles such as "ruler of Tadmor" it would seem that the normal government and institutions of Palmyra as a Roman colony continued to function. This can also be seen in inscriptions from this period which do not mention Odaenathus, but which instead show the normal organs of government active at Palmyra. An example of this is an inscription honouring Aurelius Worod, probably the same individual as the Septimius Worod mentioned in the discussion on Palmyrene society:

Αὐρήλιον Οὐρώδην  
ἱππικὸν καὶ βουλευτὴν  
Παλμυρηνὸν Βηλά-  
καβος Ἀρσᾶ τὸν φί-  
[λον] τειμῆς χάριν,  
ἔτους οφ'

<sup>13</sup> *Inv.* VIII. 55

<sup>14</sup> J.T. Milik *Dédicaces*, 317.

To Aurelius Vorodes of the equestrian order and councillor of Palmyra, Bel'aqab son of Harsa (dedicated this) to his friend in his honour, in the year 570 (A.D. 258/9).<sup>15</sup>

Worod's position as an eminent individual is clear, but what is also clear is that it was still possible at this time to honour an individual in strictly Roman terms, without making reference to Odaenathus or his family. Thus, whatever the significance of the title *Ras Tadmor* or its Greek equivalent, it is clear that such powers were still being exercised in the framework of a city with the normal institutions of Roman provincial government. The days were coming, as shall be seen, in which Palmyra would effectively become an independent allied state, but this had certainly not yet taken place in the 250's A.D. Probably the best that can be said is that in this time Odaenathus had begun to occupy a position of extraordinary prominence and significance both in Palmyra and (judging by the Tyrian inscription) throughout Roman Syria. This was recognised by the grant of the title *Ras Tadmor* by the authorities of Palmyra, and perhaps confirmed by the Roman authorities' granting of senatorial rank.

#### *A.D. 257/8 - 261*

In A.D. 257/8, the titlature of Odaenathus appears to undergo some change, which may reflect his increased dominance in the city. The term *Ras Tadmor* at this time disappears, and is replaced by the expression *λαμπρότατος ὑπατικός*, equivalent to the Latin *clarissimus consularis*. This formula is found in several inscriptions from Palmyra of the late 250's A.D., most of which consist of

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<sup>15</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 165.

dedications to Odaenathus or his son Hairan by individuals or trade guilds in the city.<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that this term means that Odaenathus had been made consular governor of Syria Phoenice at this time.<sup>17</sup> However, such an appointment would seem to contradict the law that, according to Dio, had been made after the attempted usurpation of Avidius Cassius in A.D. 175: namely, that no governor should be appointed to rule over the territory from which he himself came.<sup>18</sup> Another possibility to explain the term and its possible significance at Palmyra has, however, recently come to light. An Aramaic papyrus from Edessa describes the king there, Abgar IX, as MLK' DMYQR BHPTY' B'RHY, or "king who is honoured as a ὑπατικός at Urhai (i.e. Edessa)".<sup>19</sup> Potter suggests that both Abgar and Odaenathus, powerful eastern dynasts ruling over cities of the Roman East, had been given the *ornamenta consularia* in recognition of their positions of prominence in their respective cities.<sup>20</sup> While Odaenathus himself was not actually a king (yet), the parallel between himself and Abgar, if it is a valid one, would seem to indicate that Odaenathus did hold a position of authority at Palmyra at least roughly analogous to that of Abgar at Edessa.

This is possibly also indicated by another inscription from Palmyra, which seems to recognise some sort of overlordship by Odaenathus at Palmyra. In a dedication by the guild of gold and silversmiths at Palmyra in A.D. 258, Odaenathus'

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<sup>16</sup> M. Gawlikowski "Les princes de Palmyre", 254-255. These inscriptions only describe Odaenathus as "illustrious consular", however: Hairan is described as "illustrious son of Odaenathus the illustrious consular".

<sup>17</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Dio Cassius LXXI. 22. 2; 24-26; 31. 1

<sup>19</sup> J. Teixidor "Les derniers rois d'Édesse d'après deux nouveaux documents syriaques" *ZPE* 76 (1989), 219-222.

<sup>20</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 389.

consular rank is mentioned together with terms in both Greek and Palmyrene that indicate rulership:

Σεπ[τίμιον 'Οδαίναθον]  
τόν λαμ[πρότατον ὑπατικ]όν  
συντέ[λεια τῶν χρυσοχ]όων  
καὶ ἀργυ[ροκόπων, τ]όν δεσπότην  
τειμῆς χάριν, [ἔτ]ους θξϕ'  
μηνεὶ Ξανδικῶ.

SLM SPṬMYWS 'DYNT  
NHYR' HPṬYQ' MRN DY  
'QYM LH TGM' DY QYNY'  
'BD' DHB' WKSP' LYQRH  
BYRH NYSN DY ŠNT 569.

To Septimius Odaenathus the illustrious consular, our lord, the association of goldworkers and silverworkers (dedicated this) in his honour in the year 569 in the month Xandikos (*Palm.*: in the month Nisan of the year 569) (April A.D. 258).<sup>21</sup>

The use of the Palmyrene term MRN, usually used of a reigning prince and here translated by the Greek *δεσπότης*, would certainly seem to indicate some sort of rule at Palmyra, as opposed to his simple patronage of the association of gold and silverworkers.<sup>22</sup>

As with the preceding period, it would thus seem that Odaenathus held in the period from A.D. 257/8 to 261 a position of peculiar prominence at Palmyra, analogous even to that of a reigning king in a dependent kingdom such as Osrhoene. While (as we have seen in the preceding section) it was still possible to set up a commemorative inscription at Palmyra without making reference to Odaenathus during this time, it would seem that Odaenathus was certainly the 'first citizen', and perhaps also the effective ruler, of Palmyra prior to A.D. 261. Moreover, the granting

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<sup>21</sup> *Inv.* III. 17

<sup>22</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 389.

of the *ornamenta consularia* would seem to indicate that this position was approved, if not even established, by the Roman authorities in Syria.

#### A.D. 261 - 267

In 261 the Roman Emperor Valerian was defeated and captured by the Persian Shahanshah Shapur I, and the entire Roman East was thrown into turmoil. In these years, Odaenathus and Palmyra came to the fore of affairs in the East, with Odaenathus acting as the representative and enforcer of legitimate Roman government (i.e. Valerian's son Gallienus). In so doing, however, Odaenathus secured further titles for himself, both Roman and Palmyrene, and apparently effective independence for Palmyra. Odaenathus, as has been discussed in the chapter on Palmyra in this work, defeated Macrianus and Quietus, who attempted to seize power in the East after the defeat of Valerian, and then inflicted a series of defeats upon Shapur, re-establishing Roman authority.

In the inscriptions which come from the period 262-267, it appears that Odaenathus acquired two new titles: *Corrector Totius Orientis* and King of Kings. The royal title is seen in an inscription from Palmyra which appears to commemorate the elevation of Herodianus, a son of Odaenathus who may be the same as the Hairan mentioned earlier,<sup>23</sup> to this dignity. This elevation took place well outside Palmyra's territory, somewhere on the Orontes river, after a victory over the Persians:

[β]ασιλεῖ βασιλέων πρὸς [Ὁρ]όντη [. . . βα]σιλείας τὴν κατὰ

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<sup>23</sup> The number and names of the sons of Odaenathus is still a subject of considerable discussion. For a recent summary of the debate see D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 386-388.

[Π]ε[ρ]σῶν νείκην ἀναδησαμένῳ Σεπ[τιμίῳ Ἡρωδι]ανῷ, Ἰούλιος  
 Αὐρήλιος  
 [Σεπτί]μιος Ο[ὕ]ο[ρ]ώδης [καὶ Ἰούλιος Αὐρήλιος ... ἐπίτροπος τῆς  
 δεσ-  
 (ποίνης κεντηνά[ριος] ἀμφότεροι στρα[τηγοὶ τῆς λαμ]προτάτης  
 [κ]ολων[ν]είας.

To the King of Kings, near the Orontes . . . crowned for the victory over the Persians, Septimius Herodianus. Julius Aurelius Septimius Vorodes (i.e. Worod) and Julius Aurelius . . . procurator *centenarius* of the Queen, both *strategoi* of the illustrious colony.<sup>24</sup>

Although there are no inscriptions mentioning Odaenathus himself which come from this period, there is a posthumous commemoration dating from Zenobia's reign, which also indicates that he bore the title of King of Kings, as well as that of *Corrector Totius Orientis*. This Palmyrene inscription runs as follows:

ṢLM SPTMYWS 'DY[NT] MLK MLK'  
 WMTQNN' DY MDNH' KLH SPTMY'  
 ZBD' RB ḤYL' RB' WZBY RB ḤYL'  
 DY TDMWR QRTṢT' 'QYM LMRHWN  
 BYRH 'B DY ṢNT 582

To Septimius Odaenathus King of Kings and *Corrector* of the whole region, the Septimii Zabda, commander of the great army, and Zabbai, commander of the army of Tadmor, great men, dedicated this for their lord, in the month of Ab of the year 582 (August A.D. 271).<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these two inscriptions, there is also the milestone from the reign of Vaballathus which, as has been discussed, most probably represents the titles which Vaballathus inherited from Odaenathus on the latter's death in A.D. 267; namely King of Kings and *Corrector* of the whole East, as in the previous inscription.<sup>26</sup>

The use of the title "king of kings" by someone who was ostensibly a subject of Rome might at the first glance be thought extraordinary, and indicative of a breach

<sup>24</sup> D. Schlumberger "L'inscription d'Hérodién: Remarques sur l'histoire des princes de Palmyre" *Bulletin d'études orientales* 11 (1942-3), 36-50.

<sup>25</sup> *Inv.* III. 19

with Rome. However, this need not necessarily be the case. Indeed, the granting of a Roman title (*Corrector*) of some importance at the same time would seem to indicate that Gallienus approved, or at least tolerated, Odaenathus' elevation to royal dignity. Certainly given the situation that was then prevailing, i.e. with Odaenathus the only power of significance in the East claiming loyalty to Gallienus, it is probable that Gallienus thought he had little choice but to acquiesce.

However, it is quite possible that Odaenathus' assumption of the royal title was intended as a direct challenge, not to the Roman Emperor, but to the Persian. If this was the case, it may have been that after the defeat of Shapur by Odaenathus, Gallienus approved of Odaenathus' claim to royal power in opposition to the king of Persia: i.e., after the defeat of Shapur, Odaenathus was claiming that *he*, not Shapur, was the legitimate *Shahanshah*. In such circumstances, the approval of Gallienus is not surprising. Indeed, it is possible that there was a parallel to this action in the fourth century, when in the terms of Constantine's will his nephew Hannibalianus was created King of Kings in Armenia and given responsibility over the Persian frontier, bearing the royal title but still considered as a functionary of the Roman Empire. It may have been just such a position that Odaenathus held in the later third century.

This then brings us to the question of the status of Palmyra. David Kennedy has suggested that Palmyra had by this time effectively become an allied kingdom of Rome rather than a provincial city,<sup>27</sup> and no doubt this is, in practice at least, true. Odaenathus had by this time total control of Palmyra and effective control of much of

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<sup>26</sup> For this inscription and the discussion of Vaballathus' titulature see IV. 5 above.

<sup>27</sup> D.L. Kennedy *JNES* 50 (1991), 76; *JRS* 85 (1995), 243.

the Roman East acting as Gallienus' deputy. There was presumably little that Gallienus could have done to influence affairs in the East at this time, had he chosen to do so. Nonetheless, there is some indication that the situation according to the law was different. Despite Odaenathus' holding the royal dignity, it seems that at Palmyra at least the appearance of Roman 'normality' continued. This is seen in several commemorative inscriptions from this time from Palmyra, which show that it was still possible to be honoured there in A.D. 266 with Roman and municipal Palmyrene terms, and with no reference to Odaenathus and his family. One of these, which has already been quoted in the discussion of Palmyra's social structure earlier in this work, is reproduced again below:

ἡ βουλὴ καὶ ὁ δῆμος  
 Σεπτίμ[ιον Οὐορώδη]ν τὸν κρά-  
 τιστον ἐ[πίτροπον] Σεβαστοῦ  
 δουκην[άροιν, δι]κεοδότην  
 τῆς μητ[ροκολωνείας καὶ ἀ-  
 νακομίσαν[τα τ]ὰς συνοδίας  
 ἐξ ἰδίων καὶ μαρτυρηθέντα  
 ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχεμπόρων καὶ  
 λαμπρῶς στρατηγήσαντα καὶ  
 ἀγορανομήσαντα τῆς αὐτῆς  
 μητροκολωνείας καὶ πλείστα  
 οἰκοθεν ἀναλώσαντα καὶ ἀρέσαν-  
 τα τῇ τε αὐτῇ βουλῇ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ  
 καὶ νυνεὶ λαμπρῶς συμποσίαρ-  
 χον τῶν το[ῦ θεοῦ] Διὸς Βήλου ἱε-  
 ρέων, ἀ[γνείας καὶ] τειμῆς ἔνε-  
 κεν, ἔτ[ους ζοφ' μηνεὶ Ξανδικῶ].

The Council and the People to Septimius Worod, the eminent *procurator ducenarius* of Augustus, *iuridicus* of the *metrocolonia* who has brought back caravans at his own expense and been given testimony by the chief merchants, who has brilliantly acted as *strategos* and *agoranomos* of the same *metrocolonia* and spent greatly of his own resources and been pleasing to the Council and the People, and who now brilliantly acts as *symposiarch* of the priests of the god Zeus Bel, as evidence of his integrity and honour, in the year 577, in the month Xandikos (A.D. 266).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Inv.* III. 7



The terms by which Septimius Worod was honoured were either Roman or municipal posts: he is *procurator ducenarius*, as well as *strategos*, *agoranomos* and *symposiarch* of the priests of Bel. The only indication that the situation might be somewhat unusual is the use of the term *metrocolonia* for the usual *colonia*, which may indicate that Palmyra was claiming a status higher than that normally occupied by a Roman *colonia*.<sup>29</sup> Exactly what that status might be, however, is entirely unclear: what is clear is that the city still was, at least legally, a part of the Roman world in general, and of the Roman provincial system of government in particular.

This continuing 'Romanness' is also seen in the other of Odaenathus' titles: that of *Corrector Totius Orientis*. There has been considerable discussion concerning whether Odaenathus' title was that of *Corrector*, which is generally taken to mean that he had the overall command of all Roman troops in the region,<sup>30</sup> or a more honorary title with no practical meaning, such as *Restitutor*. The discussion centres upon two inscriptions which have both been quoted in this work: the statue base from Palmyra erected in Zenobia's reign which commemorates Odaenathus' career, and is quoted above; and the milestone from the earlier part of Vaballathus' reign which was quoted earlier in the work.<sup>31</sup>

The former of these two describes Odaenathus as the MTQNN' of the whole East, an Aramaic term derived from the verb TQN, "to set right, set in order".<sup>32</sup> Vaballathus, however, is described as the 'PNRTT' of the whole East, a direct

<sup>29</sup> J. Cantineau, commentary to *Inv.* III. 7 (p.11).

<sup>30</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 392.

<sup>31</sup> IV. 5 above.

<sup>32</sup> C. Clermont-Ganneau "Odeinat et Vaballat: Rois de Palmyre, et leur titre romain de *corrector*" *RBibl* 29 (1920), 387-388.

transliteration of the Greek *ἐπανορθωτής* which is itself the usual Greek translation for *Corrector*. The difference between the two inscriptions has been taken to mean that while Vaballathus had taken (or been given) the title of *Corrector*, Odaenathus himself had only held the less significant title of *Restitutor*.<sup>33</sup> However, as Potter has pointed out, the titles borne by Vaballathus on the milestone are likely to be those which he inherited from Odaenathus: the difference between 'PNRTT' and MTQNN' is simply that between expressing the office with a Greek transliteration in one case and with an Aramaic term in the other.<sup>34</sup> In any case, as Millar points out, the definition attached to the term *Corrector* may be misleading: there is every reason to believe that this office too was quite imprecise in its application.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the actual title which Odaenathus bore, the fact remains that it was a Roman honour, indicating that he was still considered a functionary of the Roman government. Whatever the technical implications of his title, if indeed there were any, the reality of the situation in the Roman East in the 260's A.D. was that Odaenathus ruled the Roman East as the deputy of Gallienus, and that he led the only effective military resistance to the Persians at that time. The fact that he remained the loyal adherent of Gallienus, and was never in any sense a rebel against Roman rule, is clearly indicated by the fact that he never minted coins in his own name.<sup>36</sup>

Palmyra therefore at this time was still considered a part of the Roman Empire, as is clearly seen in the inscription honouring Septimius Worod cited above.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Cantineau "Un *Restitutor Orientis* dans le inscription de Palmyre" *JA* 222 (1933), 217; F. Millar "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian: The Church, Local Culture and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria" *JRS* 61 (1971), 9-10; S. Swain "Greek into Palmyrene: Odenathus as 'Corrector Totius Orientis'?" *ZPE* 99 (1993), 157-164.

<sup>34</sup> D.S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire*, 392-393.

<sup>35</sup> F. Millar *The Roman Near East*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> J. Eadie "One Hundred Years of Rebellion: The Eastern Army in Politics", 148.

The only evidence that the city claimed higher rank than others due to the extraordinary prominence of its chief citizen is the use of the unusual term *metrocoloneia*. Odaenathus himself, however, appears to have held the effective if not official command of the armies of the Roman East, and to have taken or been given the title of King of Kings in order to threaten the position of Shapur. As such he was effectively the ruler of the Roman East as the deputy of Gallienus: the evidence indicates that he maintained this loyalty throughout.

### *Conclusion*

The situation of Palmyra and of its chief citizen in the period between 251 and 267 is therefore a quite unusual one which conforms to no normal pattern of Roman rule. This perhaps explains the difficulties which many commentators have experienced with these events, but considering the extraordinary situation in the Roman East at the time we should perhaps hardly be surprised that an unorthodox solution emerged. As we have seen, Palmyra was a *colonia* of the Roman Empire, yet at the same time it was effectively acting as an independent allied state. Similarly, Odaenathus was at once the commander of Roman forces in the East as the loyal deputy of the Emperor, yet at the same time he wore the title King of Kings and effectively ruled the East with little more than lip service to his titular master Gallienus, who was powerless to affect the outcome of events in the East. To search for any kind of regularity or normality in such a situation is clearly pointless.

Odaenathus appears to have begun his climb to supremacy in the early 250's A.D., when he first appears bearing the title *Ras Tadmor*. This title appears to have

been conferred locally and does not appear to have supplanted the normal workings of municipal government at Palmyra.<sup>37</sup> It would seem, however, by the apparent influence of Odaenathus in several commemorative inscriptions and by the meaning of the term *Ras Tadmor* itself, that Odaenathus was at least extremely influential at Palmyra.

This position of dominance appears to have been recognised and approved by the Roman authorities in about A.D. 257/8 by the granting of the title *consularis*. While this may reflect Odaenathus being governor of the province, it is more likely that it represents a Roman recognition of Odaenathus' supreme position at Palmyra. Whatever it signifies, however, matters were revolutionised by the defeat of Valerian and the usurpation of Macrianus. Suddenly, Odaenathus was the only effective force in the East loyal to the central government at Rome: once he had defeated the usurpers and the Persians, Odaenathus was the only hope that Gallienus had of retaining control of the East. Accordingly, Gallienus had little choice but to recognise and enhance Odaenathus' position. This was achieved by the grant of the title King of Kings, which was intended as a threat to the Persian king, and that of *Corrector* which, whatever its technical significance, signified that Odaenathus was the legitimate representative of Gallienus in the East. The only alternative to such an act was to grant Odaenathus imperial rank: Gallienus was, apparently, not prepared to go this far, although it is hard to say what might have transpired if Odaenathus had lived longer.

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<sup>37</sup> Equally it might well be said that the position of *princeps* held by Augustus did not supplant the normal Republican magistracies: nonetheless, the effect was that Augustus was the ruler of Rome.

These then were the titles borne by Odaenathus when he was murdered in A.D. 267, and the titles thus presumably inherited by Vaballathus at that time. The process that may have transpired from this point, and which eventually led Palmyra under Zenobia and Vaballathus to break from Rome in around 270, has been suggested elsewhere. It is nonetheless clear that, whatever the actions of Zenobia which caused the break with Rome or the reasons for those actions, they would have not been possible or even conceivable without the groundwork laid by Odaenathus.

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